新約

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）18

鎌池和馬
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Toaru Majutsu no Index: New Testament — Volume 18

Contents

- Illustrations
- Prologue: Connection Point – Destiny_Joint.
- Chapter 1: That Which is Necessary to Survive – X.
- Chapter 2: To Where Should You Flee? – Escape_to_Central.
- Chapter 3: Golden – A.D.1900_Invisible_War.
- Chapter 4: A Worthwhile Battle at Heaven's Peak – "Light".
- Epilogue: Bursting Malice – Devil_in_Evil.
- Afterword
- ?
- Bonus Short Story
- Credits

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Tsuchimikado Motoharu and Fran have become targets of the leader of Academy City. After they stumble into Kamijou Touma's room, they attempt to escape from Academy City as a last resort. However, the man in the green surgical gown certainly will not let them get away. His poisonous fang, a magic called "Karma", strikes Tsuchimikado's sister Maika, consuming her in the process.

To overcome this situation, Kamijou and Tsuchimikado decided to attack the stronghold of the board chairman of Academy City, the Windowless Building.

What awaited them inside was a vast, nihilistic space as if symbolizing the ruler's mind.

Finally the curtain is drawn.

Thus begins the tale of Aleister Crowley, a "human" with a clear consciousness.

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新約 とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)(18)

鎌池和馬

電撃文庫

9784048928939

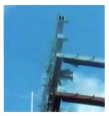
1920193006308

ISBN978-4-04-892893-9
C0193 ¥630E

ASCII MEDIA WORKS
ASCII Media Works

KADOKAWA Published by Kadokawa Corporation

Recommended Retail Price: 630 JPY
*Consumption levy will be added to the price separately



Kamachi Kazuma

ランドマークにも色々あるとは思いますが、実はドームや巨大工場より高層ビルや電波塔の方が気分が上がったりします。駅にもビルがくっついてほしい派。キャラだけでなく、ロケーションにも属性ってあるのかしら？

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Toaru Majutsu no Virtual-On

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

[The Windowless Building]
Located in District 7, the Windowless Building is the home of Aleister Crowley, the board chairman of Academy City. True to its name, there are no windows or lights on the exterior of the building, which gives it an ominous appearance.
The walls of the building are covered in a special armor known as Calculate Fortress, and it is said that it can withstand a nuclear attack (however it is not completely impregnable as Fräulein Kreutune, an immortal existence who is not part of the magic or science side, destroyed part of the wall from within).
In the basement, a huge space extends out, where a battle involving Kamijou unfolded. It was discovered then that the Windowless Building wasn't designed simply to be the board chairman's residence, but a vessel used to travel to space.
新約
とある魔術の禁書目録
インデックス
18
鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか

contents

10 Prologue Connection Point

18 Chapter 1 That Which is Necessary to Survive

58 Chapter 2 To Where Should You Flee?

108 Chapter 3 Golden

266 Chapter 4 A Worthwhile Battle at Heaven's Peak

308 Epilogue Bursting Malice

Destiny_Joint.

X.

Escape_to_Central.

A.D.1900_Invisible_War.

"Light".

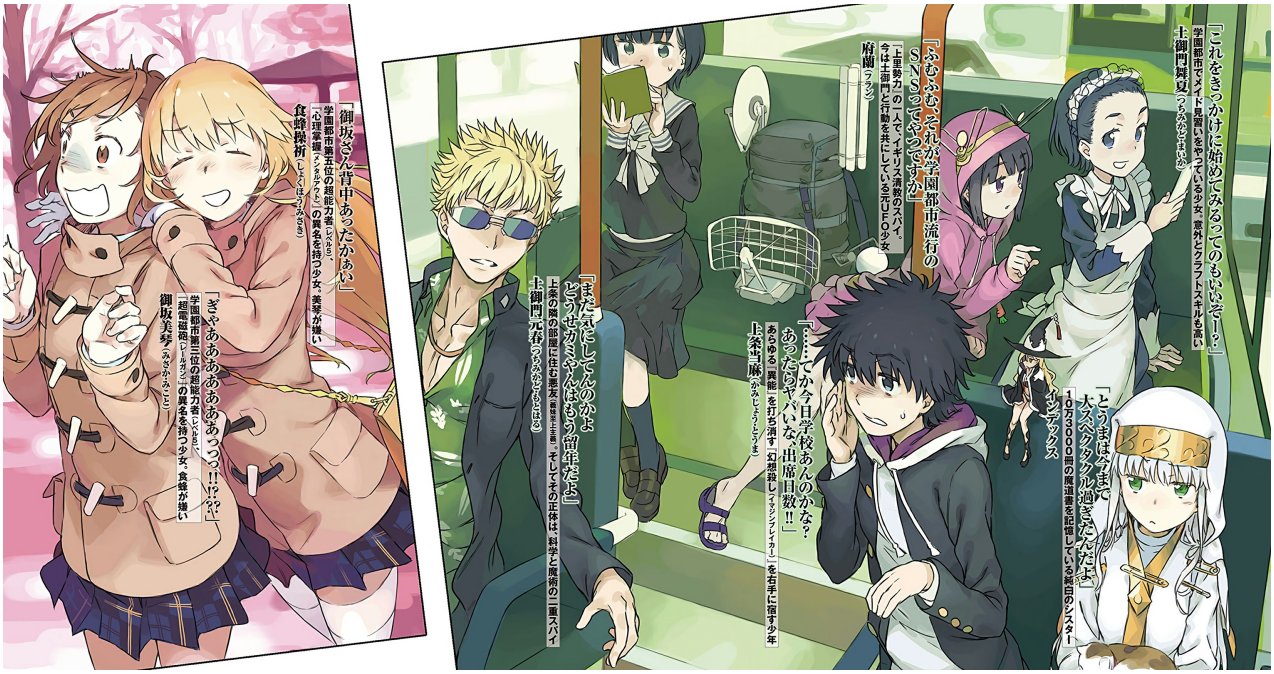
Devil_in_Evil.

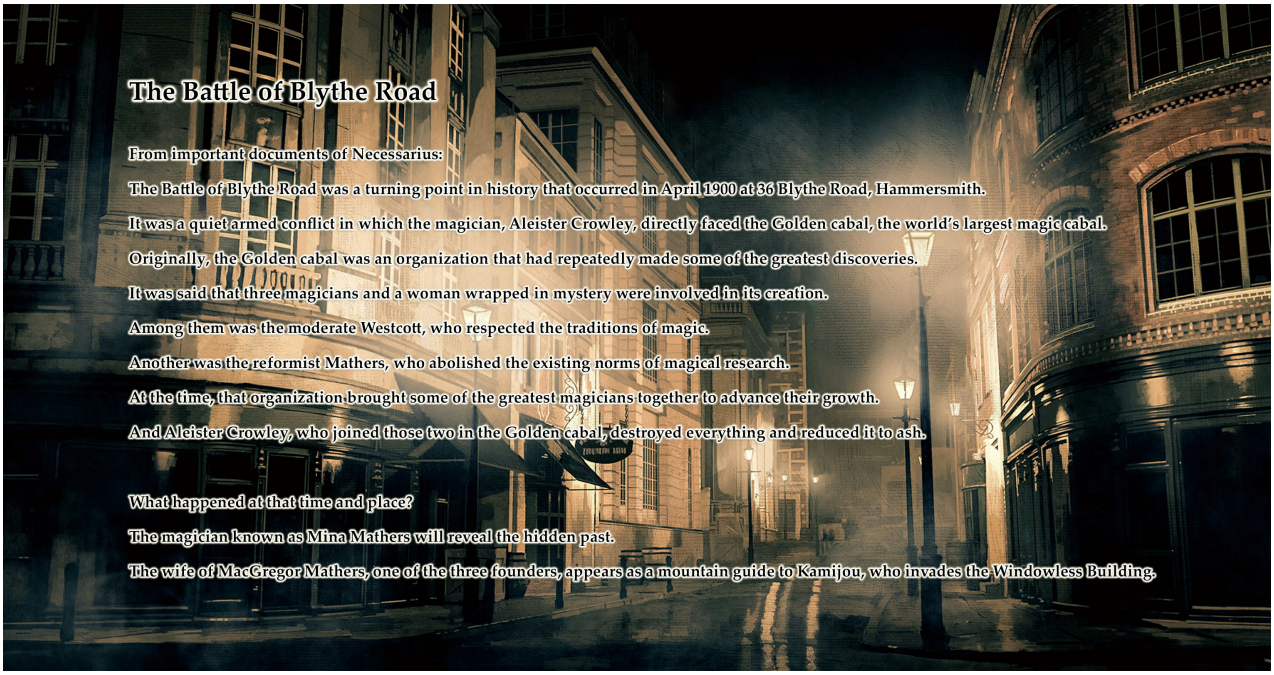
"It is obvious why
Aleister Crowley constructed
me within his own palace."

Black Cat Witch who appeared before Kamijou in the Windowless Building

Mina Mathers

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)　背景カラーイラスト／伊藤タテキ





The Battle of Blythe Road

From important documents of Necessarius:

The Battle of Blythe Road was a turning point in history that occurred in April 1900 at 36 Blythe Road, Hammersmith.

It was a quiet armed conflict in which the magician, Aleister Crowley, directly faced the Golden cabal, the world's largest magic cabal.

Originally, the Golden cabal was an organization that had repeatedly made some of the greatest discoveries.

It was said that three magicians and a woman wrapped in mystery were involved in its creation.

Among them was the moderate Westcott, who respected the traditions of magic.

Another was the reformist Mathers, who abolished the existing norms of magical research.

At the time, that organization brought some of the greatest magicians together to advance their growth.

And Aleister Crowley, who joined those two in the Golden cabal, destroyed everything and reduced it to ash.

What happened at that time and place?

The magician known as Mina Mathers will reveal the hidden past.

The wife of MacGregor Mathers, one of the three founders, appears as a mountain guide to Kamijou, who invades the Windowless Building.

Prologue: Connection Point – Destiny_Joint.

Simply viewing the history hidden on the surface is enough to know some important words are needed to describe that “human”.

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of Thelema.

Every man and every woman is a star.

Love is Thelema, love under will.

“But you had to get drunk on self-sacrifice. To hell with all of that, Kamisato Kakeru.”

“I’m done not acting like myself. I’ll show this world just who Kamijou Touma is!!”

The “human” created by those ideals was sometimes judged to have an incoherent and sharp tongue, but adding in a single term could supply a pillar that brought dramatic order to that chaotic vortex of knowledge.

“Kihara Yuiitsu is using World Rejecter as a shield to apply chains to all 100 members of the Kamisato Faction.”

“There is only one way of saving them. We must pull Kamisato-chan out from ‘the other side’.”

Namely, his plan.

The starting line was to accept the exceedingly simple fact that the “human” was always acting with a single goal in mind.

“Help us, Luca.”

“We can save Kamisato with your magic. Do you still have any complaints!?”

This was different from a normal life plan or criminal scheme. It was not a “serial” plan in which each element was stacked on top of the last and stumbling anywhere would cause it all to come tumbling down.

“I see a connection between that curse and the A.A.A.!”

“If I can continue analyzing this, I’m sure I can find a clue to saving Kamisato-kun!!”

That “human” found success with difficulty and failed all too easily.

And yet as if it were normal, he had never once given up.

“You freed me from it…”

“But that didn’t save everyone at Tokiwadai. They might be smiling on the outside, but something like a cold hunk of ice remains deep in their hearts. So overcome this and save those girls… Bring an end to this problem!!”

If one part broke, he would pile up the wreckage. If two parts were lost, he would take a detour around the cracks in the ground. He believed that a failure could be used as a handhold or foothold for the next part. So those whose thoughts were bound by the normal “serial” way of thinking could not understand his “parallel” actions. They wondered why that wicked madman was so intent on running full-force into the wall of ruin.

“When Yuiitsu stole Kamisato-han’s right hand, you alone weren’t trapped by the curse.”

“You’re actually a magician, aren’t you? And since you’re oddly obsessed with a British mascot, you’re probably from the Anglican Church.”

But did you know some of these other stories about that inhuman “human”?

“Don’t take Kamisato-kun from us, Karasuma Fraaaa

because they were deemed lewd, but he stole one of the butterfly decorations used for that task and wore it over his pants while boldly attending a social gathering.

“I see, I see, I see.”

“This would be game over then.”

For example, he gave his first daughter a name so long it was difficult to write out even in text. And when that daughter died of illness at a very young age, he left tearstains in his journal.

“This is a mere coincidence.”

“The greatest damage in all this was not from Karasuma Fran’s heat wave or Kihara Yuiitsu’s Elements. It was me leaving the Windowless Building.”

“But I will make use of this failure. As Kamisato Kakeru’s observer, you are connected directly back to Lola Stuart. With you in my grasp, I can continue on.”

He was so selfish and conceited that he spat on both the contemporary government and the immortal god. He fully believed that all people had the right to study and proclaim all truths equally. He wholeheartedly looked down on the masses who blinded themselves with their existing assumptions, morals, and beliefs and thus cast aside true freedom. And yet he held the contradictory kindness of not wanting to force out the unenlightened and scorned members of his own family.

“He’s gathering a bunch of adolescent boys and girls in one place and injecting them with drugs to achieve further knowledge. This is the return of Thelema.”

“We couldn’t shake him by fleeing like normal, but that changes if we go to the last thing he wants destroyed and use it as a shield.”

In the end, the “human” was a “human”. By viewing him as an incomprehensible monster, many historical researchers led themselves astray in an inescapable forest.

“Kamijou Touma. When you’re in trouble, it’s always a good idea to ask a classmate for help, nyah☆”

So if this “human” was no different from anyone else, why did he stack his parallel plan so high, destroy so much, and stack so much back up? Let us reject the easy route into the forest and truly dig into the inner workings of a madman.

The curtain rises.

What will now begin is the story of Aleister Crowley, a “human” through and through.

Chapter 1: That Which is Necessary to Survive – X.

Part 1

"Ahh, we're finally back home."

"Welcome back… I'm already exhausted…"

December 11, 5:30 AM.

It was early morning. The spiky-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma was utterly exhausted after running around the city all night in full bad boy mode. And the white nun named Index had been left behind the entire time. The 15cm fairy named Othinus and her natural predator of a calico cat were also there, but none of them were aware what fate awaited them just 5 seconds after opening the door to the student dorm room.

"The freeze-dried stuff sure has come a long way, nyah. I wonder if they have risotto. (Munch munch)"

"This wonton soup is soaking into my stomach like something out of hell. (Slurrrp…)"

"Maybe there's no point in asking professional idiots like you, but why do you have a lighter?"

There was something there.

The dorm room had been intruded upon by a nyah-nyah boy with blonde hair and sunglasses that did not suit him at all and a hoodie bikini rabbit-ear antennae girl with a badly broken heart that made speaking to her awkward. And they were eating something.

"What are you doing? Why are you eating my food, Tsuchimikado!? And Fran, too!? I have no idea when you two became friends and – oh, I can't believe you! How can you just eat all of the human food I'd been looking forward to!?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't check inside the fridge or rice cooker if I were you. …It'll remind you of the old term 'mental BSOD'."

"Are you serious!? Ahhh!! How could you? And this stuff too!? Ahhhh!!"

Kamijou Touma ignored the warning, opened one door to hell after another, and staggered backwards like he had taken a beating in a fighting game. The refrigerator and rice cooker gave off a rotting smell and they definitely looked like somewhere you would find a cursed item.

"The crunchy cat food's bag must have been open because it's all gone bad," said Fran. "You'll have to use what's left of the canned stuff tonight."

"Why is the cat the only one that gets better than normal food in this disaster? I refuse to accept that."

Kamijou groaned his question, but the cat only mewed happily.

Academy City's infrastructure had recovered after the major blow from the heat wave and the Elements, but there was only so much that people could do with their individual appliances still broken. For about a week, the electronics stores and online stores would be hit by a big pre-Christmas wave. …Since he lived in a dorm, he wondered if the school might help raise some money, but that would not work when they usually brought in their own appliances.

"You boiled water, so is the gas working?"

"Yeah, but the microwaves broke the ignition device, so you have to turn the knob and then get it started with some chopsticks lit with a lighter, nyah. Do it with the lighter directly and you'll burn your fingers, so be careful."

"Maybe there's no point in asking professional idiots like you, but why do you have a lighter?"

Even so, that was fortunate.

It was super primitive and difficult to control, but they could get cold and hot water. That meant they could take a bath by filling the tub with cold water and then adjusting the temperature with the hot water from a kettle!!

"I can tell from the look on your face!! The thing you've been missing recently has gotta be girls taking baths!! Ah ha ha!!!! Eh heh heh!!!!!!"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Tsuchimikado. And you've been missing throughout this entire heat wave and Elements mess, so what were you up to?"

The next thing Kamijou Touma knew, the nyah-nyah idiot's nonsense had cooled the heroines' eyes down to absolute zero. He had no idea why, but it seemed his title in life had just declined drastically.

The 15cm god on his shoulder made an extremely arrogant comment.

"Peep and I'll kill you. And I mean that literally, not just as divine punishment."

"You don't even need a sink to bathe. All you need is a teacup, so you were taking baths like normal during the heat wave. You damn bath-lover."

Whatever the case, it was best to let sleeping gods lie. She was only 15cm, but that was still 15cm. And she used a spear and bow instead of her bare hands. Think of dangerous animals like hornets, spiders, or scorpions and it was obvious that her size was plenty big to kill a human.

However…

"(But if you insist, make sure you get permission first. It's the sneaking around without telling me I don't like.)"

"Hey, god, let's not blush and whisper that extra part in my ear!!"

He had no idea if she was tempting him or refusing him, but he knew taking her seriously would only place him on the receiving end of violence. So as his understander's words caused Kamijou to act suspiciously, Tsuchimikado finally answered the question.

"Well, if you must know what I was doing, I was looking after my stepsister Maika."

"Mh… A surprisingly noble goal, good sir."

It sounded simple enough, but surviving those few days had meant facing the heat wave, the Elements, and human rioters. Protecting a single girl throughout that hell would have been no easy task. Kamijou knew firsthand that the environment had been far too harsh for "normal" ideas like protecting one's family to unconditionally apply. And yet this boy had kept true to his "normal".

He continued speaking like a soldier home from the battlefield.

"…Heh. The thing about guys is, we're willing to become a hero at any time for our little sisters."

"And you are a pervert to the core, good sir."

"Now, it's time to get to the main point, nyah. Listen carefully, Kami-yan." Tsuchimikado munched on the emergency food meant for a day off of school during a typhoon or snowstorm. "There's this guy called Board Chairman Aleister, right? Well, I kinda shot him in the head, so can you help me make a getaway?"

"That sure was a casual way of dropping that bombshell. So should I be calling Anti-Skill!?"

"…Even though he's the kind of guy who can get right back up after taking a bullet to the head?" asked Fran.

"I don't think his ability to survive it gives you free rein to shoot him all you want!"

"Now, now, Fran-chan. He didn't see it himself, so you can't expect him to understand that fear."

Tsuchimikado sighed like Kamijou was the ignorant one. It did not come up much, but he discovered that it was rather irritating to have your common sense questioned by someone who had shot someone else in the head.

"Anyway, I had been doing some inconvenient dirty work for Aleister in exchange for him protecting Maika, but he screwed it up this time, nyah. He was never exactly trustworthy and his interests are a little out of whack with everyone else. …So if I didn't give up on him here, I really could lose her."

Meanwhile, Index's eyes had grown wide as dinner plates as she held the cat.

"*Aleister?*"

"That's right, nyah."

"You don't mean *the* Aleister Crowley, do you!?"

"It's a pretty famous name, so did you think he was just borrowing it, nyah? … Sorry, but he's the real deal. This is Edward Alexander himself. He survived his historical ending in 1947 and he lives on to this day."

"Hm? Hmm??? I have no idea what you two are talking about, so could you start from the beginning?"

"You be quiet, Touma!!"

"Now another one of you is questioning my common sense!?"

“Nyahhn!!”

“And even the supposedly clueless cat is looking down on me!?”

Pets were quite good at observing the behavior of their owner(?). As he tumbled down to the bottom of the family hierarchy, Kamijou was left tearful and confused.

“What, what? So are you saying we live in a world where you can shoot a Mr. Crowley of the Aleister family in the head no questions asked?”

“Really, human…? First of all, Aleister Crowley is not his real name, but more importantly, it’s a Western name. The first name is the given name and the last name is the family name. I’m fairly certain that’s common knowledge in this world.”

No matter how sad the contents of his head, his small understander was kind enough to not give up on him. That allowed him to close up his tear ducts while he curled up and trembled. He could not forget that there was such a thing as a soft barb in this mysterious world.

“But anyway, I picked a fight with the head of Academy City, so I can’t stay here. You know my position here, right? I’m a double spy for Academy City and the Anglican Church. So once that balance is broken, I’ll be known as an enemy. That’s fine and all, but I want to avoid having Maika used as bait for me, nyah.”

That meant he would be escaping with his stepsister Maika. That was apparently a rule he had placed on himself. And it was probably more important to him than the planet as a whole or the entire human race.

“Do you have anyone to rely on…?”

“A major one right here.”

For some reason Tsuchimikado pointed his spoon at Fran who was forming a united front with him.

“She too is a magic side spy sent to monitor Kamisato Kakeru for the Anglican Church. That means our situations are similar. Since she works directly for Archbishop Lola Stuart, Aleister has his eyes on her, so we’re escaping the city together. And that means we have more authority than a normal magician, nyah.”

“I’ve called an Anglican unit to the outer edge of Academy City, but they are no more than a retrieval unit and they lack the firepower needed to destroy the wall and get inside. But if we can manage to get out of the city…”

"They're apparently magicians who specialize in concealment, so they can hide all trace of our escape. We won't need to worry about anyone pursuing us."

Leaving the city.

That sounded simple enough, but this was Academy City.

To prevent leaks of technology that could be used to develop next-generation weapons or esper powers, the entire city was surrounded by a thick wall and who was allowed in or out was greatly restricted. Breaking through that would be quite difficult. In all seriousness, they could get shot at with no warning whatsoever.

"Even if you are lucky enough to escape, will you be returning to England? Just like, um, Stiyl and Kanzaki?"

"C'mon, now. Even if I'm leaving enemy territory with the support of a standing member of the UN Security Council, I'll still be on the run. Why would I give away the answer here, Kami-yan? And there are a lot of other options, like Canada or Australia. It can be easy to forget with the EU controlling the European economy, but the old British Commonwealth still exists."

They were working on a scale where they had to take geographic history into account. Kamijou was not at all jealous and he in fact found it incredibly irritating as someone who did not want any problems to occur.

"But, well, I have no right to stop you."

"If you did stop me, I'd just get killed."

"…It's gonna be lonely without anyone in the room next door."

"Mh."

"This means you and Maika will be gone, won't it? I know these are only temporary student dorms and we have to say goodbye eventually, but it's a shock to have it thrust on me so suddenly like this."

Tsuchimikado froze in place.

Kamijou had a bad feeling about this.

"Wait… Don't tell me…"

"…That's right. I still haven't explained anything about quitting school and running

away. Yeah, Maika doesn't know anything about this."

Part 2

After cleaning up the tragic contents of the refrigerator and rice cooker (the details would be horrific, so they will be omitted here), they got down to business.

"You were protecting Maika all throughout the heat wave, right? Why aren't you with her?"

"Fran-chan is my only hope, so I was confronting Aleister to snatch her away. Stray bullets can be scary and there's no way I could bring my cute stepsister to see something like that. Not my *step*-sister, nyahhh!!"

Kamijou Touma could not figure out why he would emphasize that part, but he changed into some clothes more suitable for the chilly December weather. Even if it was due to the heat wave, he had spent the last few days like Santa Claus surfing in Australia, so he was relieved to have the normalcy of Japan returning bit by bit.

"So where is Maika right now?"

"At an emergency food site in front of District 7 Station. She's a trainee maid after all, nyah. She's not the type to just eat cup noodles or freeze-dried food. Whatever the case, she can't relax unless she gets her own ingredients and fills her fridge."

"…Why do you know exactly what she's doing when she isn't here? Don't tell me you're constantly monitoring her via GPS!"

"Only the pessimistic third-rates rely on gadgets like that. …A pro big bro can read his stepsister's current actions from his thorough knowledge of her behavior. (Grin)."

"My friends little sister is in serious trouble due to his crazy accurate stalker profiling!?"

"It's all about building it up over time. The way of the big bro isn't learned overnight, nyah. …And don't turn my tremendous accomplishment into a light

novel title."

The fact that he never doubted that this was a brightly shining accomplishment was what made him a true pervert, but at this point, persuading him with words was a lost cause. Perverts were entirely unaware of the rose-colored glasses through which they viewed the world. Removing his rose-colored glasses would probably kill him. With that in mind, Kamijou Touma moved the conversation along.

"…It must be tough having to tag along with him, Fran."

"I will never forget that look of pity you're giving me."

The hoodie bikini girl remained expressionless and pouted her lips, but she was still a hoodie bikini girl. …Kamijou had assumed the heat wave had inspired that clothing choice similar to The North Wind and the Sun, but perhaps she was the kind that forced herself to show some skin even during the winter.

"Well, I suppose I like it this way better than not. I'm definitely going to look, though."

"Might I ask why you are looking down on me like that?"

"Heh heh heh. At this rate, she might end up the kind of person who can only relax at home after stripping off all her clothing."

"You're not much different, god."

In fact, Niang-Niang and Nephthys had been much the same. If the Magic Gods at the top were like that, perhaps it was just that the magic side as a whole was strange. That might sound like an amusing adolescent delusion…but when he thought about it some more, Kanzaki the Saint showed a lot of skin with the cut-off parts of her clothing, English 2nd Princess Carissa had worn a wonderfully shoulders-baring princess dress, and Marian Slingeneyer, the Dvergr of Old Gremlin, had worn naked overalls… He did not want to think about it too much, but had he stumbled upon a truth of the world that said people approached nudity the stronger they became? And even if this was no more than a hopeless delusion coincidentally having some similarity with the truth, it was still a sad state of affairs for the magic side.

"…So was there some meaning to that Fallen Angel Erotic Maid? Like foreshadowing of an evolution to a second form?"

"What's this all of a sudden? Are you that sexually frustrated?"

He received a most welcome and very blunt warning from a god, so he decided to leave it at that.

They had other things to focus on.

“Okay, let’s go pick up Maika,” said Tsuchimikado.

“Fine, but will anyone really interfere?”

“This is our one chance.”

“Why? We’re past the 48 Hours to Restore Order, so Anti-Skill and Judgment are back up and running. And while I prefer not to think about it, those who work in the shadows will be back too.”

Kamijou meant it as a casual question, but neither Tsuchimikado nor Fran answered. Instead, they exchanged a glance.

They seemed to have a secret plan that *they could not share with the spiky-haired boy.*

This was hardly Tsuchimikado’s first time keeping secrets about magic and Kamijou doubted he would hold back when it came to the stepsister he valued higher than his own life. Kamijou felt he could relax knowing that they had *something* concrete and were not just making a desperate attempt.

Kamijou, Index, Othinus, the cat, Tsuchimikado, and Fran all set out once more into Academy City while it was still too early for the morning rush hour. Their breath was white and they kept out the cold with fluffy coats and scarves. This was another part of their precious “normal”.

Unlike when everyone was afraid of the heat wave and Elements, people were walking below the chilly sky like normal, there was a clear division between the road and sidewalk, and cars were lined up on the road. Some buildings had thick cloths placed over them and some fallen wind turbines were being replaced with ones wrapped in plastic, but the *kathunk kathunk* of passing trains came from the elevated railways and airplanes drew contrails in the sky. The city was back. That should have been a good thing, but Kamijou actually felt somewhat uneasy that law and order had been restored.

When he saw Anti-Skill holding colorful signal sticks and blowing whistles to direct traffic where traffic lights or wind turbines were being replaced, he started sneaking around.

“Don’t act all suspicious. You’ll only draw attention, nyah.”

"…I didn't even do anything, so I don't want you of all people telling me that."

It was still too early for the morning rush hour, so the number of people was likely due to people's broken refrigerators and rice makers. The 24-hour convenience stores and gyudon places were of course busy, but even the supermarkets and department stores that normally opened at 10 had their metal shutters up to welcome customers.

Drawn by the smell of food, the hoodie bikini girl turned her head.

"The distribution of goods seems to have returned to normal already."

"All the ingredients and lifestyle items that should have entered the city were stopped at the cargo terminals outside the city, nyah. By opening the gates and letting it in, blood can fill the city's arteries once more."

"So it's like relying on a blood transfusion until your own body can move properly?"

It might take time to replace the equipment needed to run the vegetable factories and clone meat buildings that supported Academy City's kitchens, but they would not wither away in the meantime. Just as Kamijou had experienced in Othinus's infinite hell, the city actually relied on a lot of food from outside.

They spotted people gathering around a shiny new ATM as a small crane removed it from a truck bed and lowered it in front of a store. They were clearly itching for the power and communication cables to be hooked up. They were regaining a life where money mattered, not water bottles or cold weather clothing.

"Hey, mister. Is this spot good?"

"Hamazura-kun, I am really grateful since we're shorthanded at the moment, but why does a kid your age know how to operate a crane? Don't you need national qualifications for that???"

"…It's weird setting one of these up after using heavy machinery to steal so many of them."

"Now I'm worried about your past!!"

With a glance over at a group wearing yellow hard hats, Kamijou's group made their way to the station plaza where (the pro big bro was disturbingly certain that) Maika was.

The plaza had become something like a farmer's market or a flea market.

Agricultural plastic baskets were full of potatoes, radishes, and other food for sale.

“Where’s Maika?”

“She probably came here to get some cheap ingredients but let her kindness get the better of her and started serving up her prized cooking for people. She’ll be working for free as a volunteer, nyah.”

“This pro big bro is seriously scary.”

“Is summing things up as a light novel title a new fad or something?”

Kamijou had made his assessment after spotting the maid girl busily working in front of a line of large pots for those who could not cook for themselves. The smell suggested it was the standard curry, but she had apparently supplied a wide variety, letting people choose freely between rice, udon, ramen, and deep-fried bread. Some of them had chicken soup prepared separately to thin out the thick curry. …Although the lack of naan gave it all a clearly Japanese flavor.

The maid girl’s face lit up as soon as she spotted them.

“Ohh! What is it, Aniki and friends?”

“Just so you know, I really don’t want anyone thinking I’m like him!!” protested Kamijou.

“…And I have most certainly never met you before, so why are you acting like we are old friends,” added Fran. “You are much too close.”

Like stepbrother, like stepsister. Maika had decided she could trust anyone that Tsuchimikado trusted. The fact that she did not even question the 15cm god meant she was either someone important or a freak.

“Oh, yeah. None of you can cook for yourselves, can you? Here to get something to eat?”

“Maybe from a maid’s perspective. But Index is transforming into a starving lion as we speak, so take care of that. Can you also get something the cat can eat?”

“Hmm, maybe some chicken boiled to get the fat off?”

Once Maika turned toward her cooler of ingredients to comply with his insolent request, Kamijou gently elbowed the legendary spy in the ribs.

“Hurry up and explain.”

“S-some things require just the right timing, nyah…”

The killer sunglasses boy who had once scaled a building wall to kill a Board of Directors VIP seemed flustered.

…Which was not too surprising since Maika clearly saw being a maid trainee as her purpose in life. Telling her to give up on that and flee Academy City was no easy task. But this was the cross that Tsuchimikado had chosen to bear. He could not rely on anyone else for this.

He gulped and faced the kitchen space.

“M-Maika-chaaan, we need to talk…”

He used history’s worst attempt at a sweet voice.

Guessing this might develop into a scene of sibling carnage, Kamijou used a paper plate of curry rice to guide Index away from the danger zone. But…

“Hm? Then I’ll have to go with you, Aniki.”

“That was fast!!”

“My home is wherever Aniki is. And I can learn to be a maid from daily life even if I’m not in Academy City.”

Come to think of it, there was no national qualification for maids, so there was no real reason to worry about her academic record. And if they went to England, she could find the royal maids known as Maids of Honor, so that might actually be a dream come true for someone in the world of maids(?).

But Kamijou tilted his head as if he had trouble accepting it.

“Odd. We’ve come all this way and nothing awful has happened to Tsuchimikado.”

“Kami-yan, you’re the worst, you know that?”

“Well, it can’t be helped, but won’t you miss your friends?”

“I will, but we’re connected by an electronic network these days. With SNSs and video chats, long distances don’t affect the bonds between people all that much. Even if I’m on the other side of the planet, I’ll probably still see them tweeting

things every few minutes. All the groups will remain intact and they'll still have that annoying habit of ignoring messages."

This was the problem with kids these days.

Kamijou was not that familiar with it all, so physical distance – especially between countries – still felt a lot like "goodbye" to him.

But it seemed Maika herself was not too broken up about it.

"Tsuchimikado, will she really be able to communicate like that if you're on the run? I mean, won't they be able to trace the signal or something?"

"She obviously can't while we're *on* the run, but things change once we've escaped."

"Huh?"

"Once the political refugee process is complete, the science side can't touch us, so it won't matter if we announce our location to the world, nyah."

…That meant they would not have to spend the rest of their lives cowering in fear inside some ruins outside of civilization. It was more like they had to visit a British embassy or consulate to get their paperwork in order and obtain a new life.

Kamijou could feel the tragic coloring of the term "refugee" fading away. What Tsuchimikado was doing was psychedelic, but he was taking his sister's lifestyle into account.

"(Looking at it that way, I'm a little worried about what will happen to those of us who helped them escape but are remaining in Academy City.)"

Kamijou thought he heard Othinus muttering something from his shoulder.

"Anyway, now that we have that straightened out, we need to hurry. Aleister's the guy at the top of the city, right? Who knows when he might interfere. Let's get you two to safety."

"Sure."

Part 3

"…"

When Misaka Mikoto left through the automatic door, no one said "thank you" or "come again".

Hospitals were strange. They were clearly a business that required customers to stay open, and yet they did not want any customers showing up.

Why had she been in that District 7 hospital?

She had contacted and activated the original A.A.A. hidden in a District 11 container yard. No, it was because of the invisible…curse? that had hit her afterwards. She remembered the pirate-like girl using some kind of archaic and occult language.

She would have been treated after being taken to the hospital, but she honestly did not remember any of it and she felt just fine. She had no difficulty moving and she felt no lingering pain.

But that was no guarantee she was safe.

What she had felt back then had not been a normal injury where an external stimulus harmed her skin. She had felt the damage resonate directly in the core of her being. And damage to the internal organs tended not to have any subjective symptoms. Oftentimes, it was too late once you started feeling pain.

Could a normal hospital even determine the cause of that? Just as a special disease might be overlooked by normal examination equipment, wasn't it possible the *thing* that had attacked her then had come from a black box or blind spot of the world?

"…What a pain."

She shook her head without thinking.

No one knew what had happened to her. Thus, no one could decide if there was still anything wrong with her. …But if she let that scare her, she would be no different from someone who visited hospital after hospital and finally ended up spending all sorts of money on a self-styled exorcist in a rundown shack somewhere. Just like with zero-day vulnerabilities, a scan result of 0 did not mean you were safe, but doubting everything would only end up restricting her for no reason.

(Now, what to do?)

The commotion caused by the heat wave and Elements was over and Academy City should be back up and running. That meant school. But she had only just left the hospital. No one would blame her if she went back to the dorm and climbed in bed.

But for some reason, she did not do so.

Her feet naturally took her to Tokiwadai Middle School in the School Garden.

"…"

Her breath was appropriately white for the early winter morning and she looked up at the front gate.

And at what lay beyond.

The white school building that had been the symbol of Tokiwadai Middle School had been destroyed in the fierce attack by the Elements. And rioters from outside had gone around looting all the furnishings and esper development equipment.

But time passed quickly.

She heard cranes, trucks, and other heavy equipment moving around. And the pile of rubble that had once been a school was already more than halfway back to being a school. With regular whistling sounds, the blocks and modules that made up the school were lowered in place by thick cables. They must have updated the method of construction again because the pieces were built up like a child's plastic building blocks and attached together with latches and filler material to construct the building with far greater speed and efficiency than normal reinforced concrete.

Even if it looked like a grand piece of art, this city was still made from the best of technology. Allowing anyone to do what normally required experts with decades of experience may have been the proof that this was advanced technology.

"…"

Why had she come here?

What had she wanted to do at Tokiwadai?

The girl was lost in thought as she watched what looked like a fast-forward construction scene in a construction company's commercial, but then a sweet voice slipped into her ear.

“Ohh? Misaka-san? You have more studious ability than I would have guessed.”

Part 4

They were making a great escape from Academy City.

…However, that did not mean they had to jump onto the roof of a speeding train, cling to a plane’s wheel just before takeoff to slip inside, or dig a tunnel with a spoon. They walked like normal, waited at the bus stop like normal, and rode to District 11 like normal. It was not quite rush hour, so there were still plenty of empty seats.

“Quit looking around like that, Kami-yan. There aren’t any bullets hidden in here.”

“A-are you sure?”

It had been such a peaceful day that it was actually worrying Kamijou.

Since Maika would occasionally use her cellphone to snap a photo of the scenery out the bus window, he could guess that she was more reluctant to leave than she had let on.

“I don’t know what to do with myself when time just passes and nothing happens…”

“Everything’s too much of spectacle with you, Touma. This is how things are supposed to work. You need to fix your internal clock.”

Index was exactly right. He was a little concerned that he could no longer sit still in a classroom desk for a full class period.

Time passed slowly in the bus, but they finally entered District 11 and got off just as rush hour was starting. The bus heading back toward the center of Academy City was like a battlefield. Kamijou generally walked to school, rain or shine, but he could tell now just how hard it could be to take a bus or train to school.

District 11 had also been an important location when rescuing Kamisato.

“I had pictured this district as nothing but piles of containers, but looking at it now, there are a surprising number of people living here.”

“It’s primarily used as a land route distribution base, so you weren’t wrong. But the rent here is super cheap. Although it’s a bit of a food desert with no convenience stores or supermarkets, so I can’t recommend it, nyah.”

Half of the products that entered Academy City passed through here, but the people living here could not touch it. Academy City’s trains ended service early, so relying on online stores was probably the only option for living here.

“…Wait, do we have school today? If so, my attendance is in trouble!!”

“Are you still worried about that, Kami-yan? I’m sure you’re already getting held back.”

“Still, sure, already!? Don’t give up on me with that triple punch!! Being held back is an incredibly heavy blow for a high schooler!”

Everyone’s life was different. There were plenty of reasons to repeat a year, including fighting a serious illness or spending your time working to support your family. But not having a reason like that and having everyone in his class calling him “senpai” for no better reason than “he’s dumb” was not the ideal school life Kamijou Touma had in mind. Yes, there was no real logic to his expectations. It was on the same level as his desire to have experienced romance and lost his virginity by 20, or to have that happen with a pretty young woman who lives in the neighborhood. But he wanted to view his journey to adulthood from an adolescent perspective. This was a part of his life he had to protect at all costs!

“I’m clinging to this no matter what, dammit.”

“It’s no use…”

“Mutter, mutter. A young dorm manager. Mutter, mutter. Needs help hooking up her TV and DVR.”

“Now what are you channeling, Kami-yan?”

The connections between thoughts were supposed to be how the human brain outdid a supercomputer, but that could lead to tragic results if used incorrectly. And this was a stereotypical example of exactly that.

Othinus bit the spiky-haired boy’s earlobe from his shoulder.

“Hey, human. Wake up already. Gnaw, gnaw.”

“Ah!? Wh-what was I doing just now…?”

“You were in quite the insane trance. You might have some talent in Seidr.”

“U-um, uh…oh, right. Tsuchimikado, reaching the edge of the city is all well and good, but what do we do now? I doubt they’ll let you through the gate without authorization.”

Kamijou looked up at a wall more than twice his height. Since Tsuchimikado had chosen this spot in particular, the Anglican recovery team would be waiting on the other side.

But this was not the goal. Even if it was only a few meters, this was the hard part. They could not walk through the wall like ghosts, so they would need a way past it.

Tsuchimikado had an answer:

“We just have to climb over.”

“I have a feeling it’ll be harder than that.”

After all, it was guarded by people allowed to fire at will to prevent technology leaks. It had to be protected by sensors and cameras. When you could be shot to death if spotted, very few people would attempt that deadly bouldering.

But Tsuchimikado readily continued.

“Kami-yan. The thick wall surrounding Academy City and its underground structure also function as a largescale particle accelerator. And it of course functions in the billions of eVs. A single electrical short involves enough energy to vaporize a sports stadium in a flash of light, nyah.”

“And it is a facility meant to slam atoms or protons together at more than 99% the speed of light to observe what happens when they break apart, so if the tunnel shielding breaks when it’s in use, all sorts of neutrons will get out,” added Fran. “Although that thick lead shielding might have protected the equipment from the heat wave.”

“This is sounding more dangerous by the second, but I guess that just means this city is as insane as ever.”

“Just because it’s 200m belowground doesn’t mean it’s safe, nyah. And that means it’ll have strict safety features,” explained Tsuchimikado. “The circular wall is covered in cameras and sensors, but there’s a hierarchy of precedence within the entire wall facility. Protecting the accelerator takes top priority and the rest comes later. …So if the accelerator’s internal stability is damaged, all resources

will be used to help that recover. Meanwhile, the security meant to prevent intruders or escapees will drop considerably. So much so that it might just be possible to negate it entirely, nyah."

With that, Tsuchimikado pulled out some dangerous-looking items and began assembling them.

"That means this is a job for a big drill and some aqua regia, nyah. Let's have some fun punching a hole in the wall and ground and shorting out the wires!"

"Bff!? You were carrying that with you on the bus!? Isn't that the stuff they use to dissolve corpses in mafia movies!?"

This was a mixture of hydrochloric acid and nitric acid which was seen in the world of entertainment just as often as hydrofluoric acid. Unlike simple sulfuric acid, it could cruelly dissolve pure gold and platinum with no difficulty, so it was known for being able to dissolve a corpse without even leaving a pacemaker's circuit board behind. …Which made it very dangerous to carry around because there was nothing to be done if the container was accidentally broken.

"I have the layout memorized. I'll start working in the cameras' blind spot, drill diagonally down from the base of the wall while making sure to avoid the network of sensor wires running through the wall, and then pour the aqua regia inside, nyah. It doesn't actually have to get deep underground. It just has to fry the power cable connecting the wall and underground."

"Fine, fine. Just get to it on your own, oh great teacher."

This was just cheating. Kamijou made his sulky comment while staring at Tsuchimikado like he was watching a movie he thought was a thriller but ended up revealing the killer to be a chupacabra. What had this perfectionist wanted from him? It made no sense, but it seemed that Tsuchimikado and Fran saw some special meaning in simply *having the pointy-haired boy involved.* So they only wanted him to earn a participation trophy and were not expecting him to actually do anything. Kamijou started wishing they had just sent him a congratulatory message instead of having him tag along.

A sound much like grinding stone continued for a while.

Without much trouble, Tsuchimikado drilled a hole larger than a fist and poured the cruel chemical inside.

The completely normal and brisk early morning came to an extremely noisy halt. The sound was deep enough that Kamijou could not believe that much electricity

had been in use up until now.

“There’s more than one power cable, so it’ll be back up and running in 4 minutes and 50 seconds. That’s about the length of a longish song, but it won’t be easy climbing up and over in that time. Go!!”

With that yelled word, Tsuchimikado grabbed a rope-like string of LED Christmas lights strung up nearby and tossed it to the top of the wall. He could climb a tall building on his own, so this would mostly be for Maika and Fran. A “ladies first” mentality apparently manifested inside him only when it came to his little sister.

That said, it was just the one rope, not a rope ladder with rungs. Climbing the wall with that would be hard work.

Tsuchimikado seemed confident in himself because he took up the position at the bottom.

“First, we’ll push up Maika since she’ll probably take the longest. Then Fran-chan. Whoever’s at the top can help pull up the next person. That should speed things up.”

“Understood,” said Kamijou. “I’ll help push you up from below.”

A thick wall was a lot like the Great Wall of China, so once you were at the top, there was no danger of falling off. There was plenty of space to brace yourself as you pulled up a heavy person.

Meanwhile, Maika seemed worried about her long maid’s skirt.

“I am dressed like this, you know?”

“Just get going. I’ll wear a blindfold if that would help.”

“Hey, human. You might think you’re letting out your gentlemanly side, but wearing a blindfold while letting a maid step on you only makes you look like a high-level pervert.”

Thanks to the helpful divine message, they just went for it.

Kamijou and Tsuchimikado worked together to grab Maika’s legs and lift her up. Even if it was a tall wall, it was only about twice their height, so they barely needed the Christmas light rope. The maid trainee grabbed the edge of the wall with both hands and managed to pull herself up with some struggling.

Maika then leaned down from the wall and reached out her hand.

“Hey, Kamijou Touma. Once we get to…well, I don’t actually know where we’re going, but I’ll contact you, so make sure you accept my friend request.”

“I don’t really do SNS stuff much…”

“Then this is your chance to get started.”

They would not be able to see Maika or Tsuchimikado after they crossed this wall, but that did not mean they would lose all contact. So Kamijou nodded. Seeing that, the maid trainee smiled a little.

It happened immediately afterwards.

They did not have time to give Fran a turn.

First, a low, sinister sound exploded, but Kamijou had no idea what had caused this blatant phenomenon.

Part 5

The wall.

Kamijou Touma saw a great change there.

Something like a black shadow rose straight up from the thick wall surrounding Academy City.

That was a sign of an evil will that refused to let anyone escape.

And it had swallowed up the small girl who had climbed on top of the wall.

“Maika…!?”

Tsuchimikado cried her name because that dark shadow contained some kind of power. The small girl’s mass floated unsteadily in the air. It almost looked like a rod had thrust forcefully up at her. Before she could even scream, she lost balance and fell where Tsuchimikado just barely managed to catch her.

Something was not right.

Kamijou Touma could see something that clearly should not have been there.

“What…is this…?”

Maika lay limp in her brother’s arms, but that made no sense. She had not slammed into the ground, so she should not have taken any real damage.

But the reason for her lifeless limbs was obvious.

The strange black shadow had condensed into a short sword that pierced the center of her flat chest. She was not bleeding, but it stabbed through her maid uniform and her flesh. The tip even jutted out from her back.

This was clearly not possible under the normal laws of physics.

This was an attack from an unseen pursuer using some kind of supernatural power.

“Outta the way, Tsuchimikado. My right hand will take care of this.”

“No, wait! Don’t, human!!”

Just as Kamijou took a step forward, he was stopped by Othinus, his understander who was closer to him than anyone.

“This Board Chairman has kept you in his city all this time, so do you really think he would use the supernatural without understanding how Imagine Breaker works!? This curse was built to be broken!!”

“What does that mean!? Can we save Maika or not!?”

“Touma, this is like a jigsaw puzzle made from glasswork.”

Index was calmly observing Maika’s body.

The grimoire library was analyzing the curse.

…Did that mean this was magic and not an esper power?

“If it shatters, the shards will scatter everywhere. They’ll tear Maika’s body apart from within. Touching it with your right hand will only make things worse.”

“Dammit, they can do that!?”

The attack was like a trick painting. It was unlike anything he had come across before. It did not constantly recover like Stiyl’s Innocentius and it was not so powerful it was merely deflected like Magic God Othinus’s Gungnir. Instead of using brute force, it was a gloomy trap built using limited resources.

The impression given by magic could change greatly depending on who was using it.

That and the fact that the attacker had not shown themselves did not sit well with Kamijou.

And it reminded him of something.

Specifically, the term “curse” did.

(…It's *him*.)

Misaka Mikoto had been taken out while they worked to rescue Kamisato. When she had been targeted while breathing life into the original A.A.A., hadn't the attacker similarly used a curse without ever showing themselves?

(Is *this bastard* the one that did that? Because my right hand prevented him from completely taking out Mikoto, he's updated his method…!?)

If that nightmarish thought was accurate, then Kamijou was partly to blame for throwing Maika into this great vortex of abnormality.

"Index, do you understand how exactly this works? What about you, Othinus? If my Imagine Breaker won't work, how are we supposed to get this out of her? Fran, Tsuchimikado. Doesn't anyone know!?"

That may have been a meaningless question, like a family member pleading with a doctor before surgery. Repeating the question may not have increased Maika's odds of survival.

If anyone knew the answer, they would not have remained silent.

Index had perfectly memorized 103,000 grimoires, Othinus was the sole surviving Magic God, Tsuchimikado was a double spy between magic and science, and Fran had been secretly tasked with monitoring Kamisato Kakeru. The question was right in front of them, but not even the combination of those heretical minds could find the answer.

This was Academy City's Board Chairman.

This was the barrier known as Aleister Crowley.

"…Hey, Kami-yan."

Tsuchimikado finally spoke.

"I want to make a change of plans, but that's probably going to make this as big a fight as possible. Will you still hear me out?"

"Don't beat around the bush. Just tell me you want me to help out with your selfish desire."

With his stepsister in his arms, the brother smiled a little at his classmate's immediate answer.

He had a complex position as a double spy, but he could speak honestly here even if Academy City was enemy territory. However, the pointy-haired boy probably did not realize just how grateful Tsuchimikado was for that.

The sunglasses boy just blurted it out, like a load had been lifted from his shoulders.

“If this curse came directly from Aleister, we should be able to find out how to remove it if we go to him. Magic is a technique made to be used by human hands after all. But that means facing the very person we were trying to escape. It’s like running right into the tiger’s den where an extra-large man-eating tiger awaits.”

“Meaning?”

“The Windowless Building. We enter his fortress.”

That idea flipped their plans on their head.

Instead of escaping outside the city, they would be breaking into the enemy’s lair. They would be running, racing, and charging right into the center of the world to protect a precious life.

But Kamijou did not hesitate.

He too smiled.

“Sounds great. That’s more my style.”

“Just to be clear, we’re talking about an indestructible fortress that can withstand a nuke.”

“But nothing’s absolute. I’ve seen that indestructibility broken twice already. Once with Thunder God Thor and once with Kihara Yuiitsu.”

He only had to share what information he had from those experiences.

And a look at Fran’s face showed she too understood as someone who had experienced the latter example.

“There’s a giant underground space below the building. Kamisato Kakeru used World Rejecter to save us and that destroyed the rocket boosters on the bottom of the Windowless Building. …That means there’s a big hole there right now. That building’s not exactly impregnable right now; we can climb right on in.”

…Of course, the odds of Aleister being unaware of the hole in his royal palace

were nearly nonexistent. So the odds were astronomical that there would be some kind of trap or ambush prepared for them inside.

But it was true that they had no other option.

While waiting around, the promised 4 minutes and 50 seconds passed. And even if they did try to climb the wall again, that curse would probably attack them again. Either way, they would have to eliminate the “human” reigning at the top of Academy City if they were to escape safely.

So Kamijou and Tsuchimikado did not hesitate.

Neither good nor evil would help them here. Since the “human” who built the city had written the rulebook, they may indeed have been deserving of punishment for trying to escape. But they trusted their own personal opinion over the even rulebook adored by 6 or 7 billion people.

They would protect that single precious life.

Even if the rules gathered in a book somewhere said it was wrong, they had no reason whatsoever to feel ashamed. This was an act that did not require them to ask anyone’s permission. The heat wave and Elements had left and the 48 Hours to Restore Order had passed. Normalcy had returned. So they would obey that normalcy and act accordingly.

With that in their hearts, the two boys spoke in unison as they made a declaration to the entire world.

“Let’s tear it all down.”

“Let’s tear it all down.”

Chapter 2: To Where Should You Flee? – Escape_to_Central.

Part 1

As Misaka Mikoto walked around like a wandering traveler, a familiar person called out to her.

“Shokuhou? What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“…You look like the overly diligent girl who shows up to school after everyone forgot to tell her it was canceled due to a typhoon.”

“Cough, cough!! Where did you get that kind of imagination ability!? Th-that obviously isn’t what happened here!!”

“Quit grabbing at me. You’re way too close.”

The #3 averted her eyes in annoyance when the other girl got carried away and got so close their noses nearly touched.

Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki.

These were the two aces of prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School. They were the monsters who were two of Academy City’s seven Level 5s.

But there was no one here to give them envious looks.

Mikoto pushed lightly at the center of Shokuhou’s ample chest to shove away the great pressure of that girl’s body.

“…I see no one showed up,” muttered Mikoto.

They were the only 2 wearing the Tokiwadai uniform. There was no one else here. Academy City was back to normal, so they should have had classes. Given the state of the school building, they might have rented out space elsewhere. But no

one had gathered anywhere. The school structure had collapsed.

The #5 childishly pouted her lips.

“Well, can you blame them after all that? If 1 or 2 of them stopped showing up, their dorm manger or a counselor would deal with it, but there’s nothing the adults can do when it’s all of them.”

The lonely queen seemed to be saying any girls who could continue on “like normal” were the extraordinary ones.

“I do understand how they feel.”

“I didn’t expect to hear that from you, Misaka-san.”

“Really?” Mikoto breathed a white sigh. “It wasn’t the shock of seeing their school destroyed. Nor was it the fear of having those rioters attack. …They’re afraid of their own power. And after learning how exactly to use that power to survive, they’re not sure they can just switch it off and return to their normal lives. So their gears have ground to a halt.”

Tokiwadai Middle School was a prestigious esper development school.

The young ladies registered there were Level 3 at the lowest and Level 5 at the highest.

Almost all of the students had a power that surpassed that of a blade or handgun if used properly, but something had become twisted.

Yes.

“A lot of them weren’t really sure why they were training their powers.”

Shokuhou breathed a white breath, wrapped her own arms around herself, and rubbed her thighs together.

Why are you studying?

How many people could give a proper answer to that question? Because my parents told me to, because my teachers taught me to, because that’s how the world works. Those would be most people’s answers. Even the students with a clear vision of their future would only have something vague like “for the entrance exams” or “for my future”.

Only a small handful would have specific puzzle pieces in mind, such as “I need to

learn how to use this equation so I can build a rocket".

The young ladies of Tokiwadai Middle School were the same.

"Shirai-san and some others are running around looking after everyone, but the ones like that are rare indeed. Really, it's a shame to just leave her with you, Misaka-san."

"Leave her with me? You make it sound like she belongs to you."

"She doesn't belong to you either."

All this time, those girls had developed their powers without a clear vision of how they would use them.

"Using your powers."

As Mikoto brought her hands close and blew a white breath into them, Shokuhou moved in close for some reason. It was not worth fighting it, so the 2 of them continued breathing to warm their numb fingertips.

Shokuhou pressed her shoulder against Mikoto's and gave off a sweet scent as she continued.

"…It's all perfectly normal, but it's a frightening normal. Their ability allowed them to easily survive during the scorching heat wave and the ferocious Elements, but now that they know they're *bringing that same ability into their peaceful everyday lives*, they can't help but feel afraid."

Power and pleasure could be similar.

Once you got a taste, there was a risk of growing addicted.

It was true of drugs, it was true of cheat codes, it was true of gambling, and it was true of cheating on tests.

Once you knew you had a way of making it all easier, you could not do anything else. The powers that had let them survive so easily in that harsh environment would always be with them. Their lives would be much more convenient if they used them. But if you used the elevator instead of the stairs, your legs would grow weak. And if you relied on your smartphone's kanji conversion, you would have difficulty writing or reading. Similarly, learning of an easier way would leave you unable to restrain yourself to the way you had lived before.

They could not forgive themselves for growing so hideously corrupted.

They were afraid of how useful their power would be in the world.

“Since you said you understand how they feel, can I assume you burned yourself out with your full combustion ability?”

“Personally, I don’t see how you can act like nothing happened. Since the shock didn’t impact you, just how much do you usually rely on your powers?”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who goes all biri biri year-round. But it might have something to do with us being Level 5s.”

“Maybe so.”

“Every Level 5 restrains their power,” said Shokuhou. “Well, maybe that’s going too far. But at our level, our status as human beings is inextricably attached to the strength of our power.”

When an athlete won an Olympic gold medal, they could no longer escape that sport no matter what kind of private life they lived. When a scientist won the Nobel Prize, they would end up relying on their field of study no matter what job they got. Those with superb results would be bound by those results. They were made painfully aware that they always had that ability with them and they would walk around with it as a constant companion. And at a level that produced no subjective symptoms.

Nevertheless, Misaka Mikoto had said she understood the feelings of the girls who were trying to separate themselves from their power.

“Couldn’t you use your power to act as a counselor for them? Your Mental Out works on anyone but me, right?”

“Maybe so. But I don’t think this is an abnormal mental state.”

“?”

“They are always carrying a power that can kill someone depending on how it’s used. And unlike a blade or gun, they can’t just put it down. Isn’t that something that *should* fill you with fear ability?”

“Well, I suppose so.”

“They can’t exactly learn how to control themselves in real battles like you did, Misaka-san, but I think it is important for them to find a compromise with themselves now that they’ve felt this fear. If I used my power to numb their fear of these deadly weapons and sent them back to their school life, who knows what

they could do with a smile on their face."

"Did you just refer to me like I'm some kind of monster?"

"Firing a metal shell at 3 times the speed of sound without killing anyone requires more precise control ability than shaving off all your unwanted body hair by swinging a Japanese sword around. Although you might not understand that since you do it all on instinct."

Misaka Mikoto sighed.

Her own heart must have been weakening. She found herself saying something she never would have normally.

"…Can I discuss something with you?"

"No, thank you. I'm afraid you'll swing a spear at me, so let's not."

"It has to do with that idiot."

"Why didn't you say so sooner? You don't even have to ask in that case."

For some reason, Shokuhou leaned forward with incredible intensity.

Their lips were less than 5cm apart, so an outside observer would have seen it as an incredibly lily-scented scene between two high-class girls.

"What's scaring me isn't my #3 Level 5 power. It isn't my Railgun."

"Isn't it cruel to discuss this with the #5?"

"I'm not trying to brag about my superior ranking." Mikoto pressed her index finger against Shokuhou's lips. "I'm talking about a 'power' other than my esper power."

"Mhh. Misaka-san, can you stop squishing my lips?"

"I'm wondering what to do about the A.A.A."

Part 2

“Hmm?”

Maid Girl Tsuchimikado Maika casually opened her eyes, got up, and tilted her head. She had a short sword made of concentrated shadow piercing her flat chest, but she showed no sign of pain, suffering, or fear.

“So what is this thing? Are you sure it isn’t just a prank using trick art or a hologram?”

…Kamijou did not *want* a girl he knew to writhe in pain while holding her chest, but this was creepy in its own way. A lack of subjective symptoms could not be used as a parameter to decide if she was safe or at risk. It was a frightening comparison, but this reminded him of the occasional special report on TV about someone who returned to their normal life with a scalpel or forceps accidentally left in their body during surgery.

And they did not have time to sit around.

A heavy sound dropped down.

“…?”

Kamijou frowned and they all turned their heads.

There was something on the roadside, even though there had been nothing there before. Kamijou could not initially identify the clearly out-of-place object that seemed separated from the background. It was a silver ring of unknown use. It had no writing or pattern, but it was Tsuchimikado who identified it, not the pointy-haired boy.

“A handcuff?”

Yes, that was right. A handcuff. It had been hard to tell with just the one half, but now that he knew what it was, Kamijou relaxed. He was relieved to be able to describe the mysterious object in his own words and categorize it accordingly. He just had few opportunities to come into contact with that sinister tool.

But unsurprisingly, it did not end there.

Something wriggled.

As if to make up for the handcuff’s missing parts, a fingertip-sized chain shot out from one end of the silver ring. There was no space to contain a chain, but it kept extending endlessly like a tape measure. It writhed, wrapped around itself, and finally took a single form.

It almost looked like a human skeleton.

Then it absorbed and gathered something like sugar water that floated in the air and enveloped it like invisible flesh and blood.

The one ring acted like a skull and the 4 limbs were bent to hang its head and scrape its forehead against the ground.

Then the handcuff ring lifted from the ground and whatever-it-was stared at them with its 4 limbs planted firmly on the ground.

At this point, it was more beast than human.

And that brought a certain term to Index's mind.

"…Beast666."

"Aleister Crowley's magic name!?" roared Othinus from Kamijou's shoulder.

That acted as the trigger.

While acting as the core of the invisible flesh and blood, the handcuff and chain emitted a strange rainbow-colored light. It was an otherworldly scene, like seeing someone in an LED suit dancing in the darkness. And it was also reminiscent of a hard ball being thrown underhand just off the ground.

At this point, they could not claim it had no hostile intent.

They had not just been coincidentally caught in a random attack.

"Ohhh!?"

Kamijou honestly obeyed the fear and loathing that spread from his heart to his entire body. He clenched his right fist and took a step forward. Rather than drawing out his courage, he swung his fist for the same pessimistic reason as someone grabbing for the remote to change the channel when a horror movie came on TV.

"!? Wait, human!!"

Othinus shouted from his shoulder again.

He jumped in surprise, but there was no stopping now. He understood he had stepped on some kind of landmine. After all, the Magic God who had crushed Imagine Breaker with Gungnir or her crossbow was frantically telling him to stop.

Something awful was bound to happen. The fear and regret sneaking up his spine were enough to make him want to squeeze his eyes shut.

Then his fist collided with the chain skeleton.

Immediately afterwards, the clear flesh and blood and the rainbow-colored skeleton burst like a water balloon.

“Eh…? Ah…???”

Because it had gone too well, Kamijou’s heart pounded irregularly in his chest. It was like being told that a ballpoint pen would give him a shock if he knocked on it, clenching his teeth as he tried it, and then finding that nothing happened. His mind was unsure how to process the phenomenon before his eyes.

But the magicians were still cautious.

“Don’t let your guard down,” said Fran. “*Some kind of haze is enveloping you*!!”

“?”

When Hoodie Bikini Fran pointed that out, Kamijou finally looked down at his own body.

She was right.

It was not quite static electricity, not quite an aurora, and not quite fog. It was like the shininess on the surface of a CD. Some kind of vague haze was seeping out of the air and vanishing as it thinly surrounded him. Kamijou may not have known much about magic, but the similar coloration to the strange handcuff chain told him this was bad news.

“B-but so what? It doesn’t matter if this light or haze or whatever surrounds me. It’s not like it hurts or-…”

His entire body froze before he could finish with “anything”.

He saw Tsuchimikado Maika who merely looked puzzled.

She clearly had a weapon through her chest, but she felt no pain or suffering. A lack of subjective symptoms did not mean nothing was wrong.

“Karma, hm?”

Tsuchimikado sounded annoyed.

Kamijou frowned.

“Karma?”

“You might not expect that from a Brit like Crowley, but as much as the Golden cabal likes to say it’s based in Kabbalah, its foundation of Hermeticism is actually a multinational mix of Egyptian and Greek mythology with names like Thoth and Mercury all over the place. On top of that, he made his own conversion chart to show how the Eastern I Ching worked using Western values. His journeys took him to Asia and there’s a story of him trying to change religions on the spot upon seeing a Kamakura-era Buddhist temple.”

“No, um, I was more asking what karma even is.”

“Karma as in karmic retribution. It’s the idea that your own actions invite the result you receive.” Othinus crossed her arms and sighed on his shoulder. “The simplest form of karma is the karma of killing. If you kill someone’s parent, the child will pursue you for revenge. That’s your karmic retribution. …And that’s what you’ve done here. By shattering and killing that rainbow chain with your right hand, you now bear that karma. This is not a good situation. *He* clearly sent that assassin to place this karma on you.”

Index put on a troubled expression and continued the explanation.

“According to Book 4 and Liber 777, the chain symbolic weapon is used to bind wandering thoughts. But unlike the fire wand or wind dagger, it isn’t a physical tool. It’s only a way for the spell user to gain subconscious control.”

“So what happens to me with this stuff around me…?”

“I don’t know. But the more it happens, the more powerful and thicker it will grow. You can punch through a single piece of paper with a fingertip, but enough layers of paper can stop a bullet.”

Kamijou pictured himself being forced to wear 10 or even 100 layers of clothing. Just how much weight and pain would they bring? It was possible he would be rendered immobile.

“But can’t I just destroy this rainbow karma stuff with my right hand?”

“Aleister has been raising Imagine Breaker in his city, so do you really think he wouldn’t have thought of that, human? You can kill the karma, but then you will bear the karma of killing karma. If you kill the child come to avenge their parent, you’ll only be attacked by their sibling.”

The more he killed, the more his karma would grow, so it would quickly snowball out of control. Did that mean it would be best to ignore it?

But something bothered him.

“Hold on. …If the penalty grows the more I kill…”

“Yeah.” Tsuchimikado cautiously looked around. “I doubt it’ll end with that one.”

They heard something fall to the ground.

They had no idea where it had come from, but a handcuff ring had fallen a short distance away, just like before.

No, that was not all.

Unlike before, there was something like a bicycle gear with it.

With a deafening metallic noise, a chain shot from the both heads and formed humanoid skeletons.

One was a chain meant to bind something to prevent movement.

The other was a chain meant to carry some kind of force to accelerate movement.

They were both chains, but their essences were different.

“Those symbolic weapons have no original role! View the gear as the sun and it symbolizes the male. View the handcuff as a ring and it symbolizes the female. That symmetry is being used to draw out a nonexistent element!”

“Oh, no! Is this the karma penalty? Did I bring this here!?”

Kamijou shuddered as the eerily-glowing skeletons formed, but Index shook her head while holding the calico cat in her arms.

“No, that wouldn’t explain why the first one appeared. The original cause has to have existed before you destroyed the rainbow chain monster!”

“The original…cause…?”

What was the first abnormal situation?

Kamijou Touma, Index, Othinus, Karasuma Fran, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, and even the cat focused on a single point.

“?”

Tsuchimikado Maika alone tilted her head as everyone looked her way.

The painless shadow sword still pierced the center of her chest.

Something invisible clung to the 2 chain skeletons like sugar water. It was flesh and blood. Assassins with fangs and claws were finally born.

Defeating them would not end this.

More and more would appear.

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me…”

They were karmic beasts.

Defeating one of them would surround you with a rainbow haze and no one could imagine what would happen once that grew to 10 or 100.

Win or lose, that flock of sin would place “something” on your back.

A clear threat arose within the abandoned territory just inside the wall where they could not ask anyone for help.

“Then what? Are these handcuffs and gears going to continue spawning endlessly as long as that’s in Maika’s chest!? That means we can’t lose them no matter where we go!!”

The rainbow chain skeletons and their transparent flesh and blood rushed in like a pack of hyenas mobbing some raw meat from every direction. Seeing hands, hand, hands, and more hands with sharp claws, Kamijou clenched his right fist despite knowing that was a bad idea.

“Nn!!”

Hoodie Bikini Fran immediately raised her voice. She had stopped being a UFO girl and was now an Anglican magician.

“Virgo. Heh, Heh, Vau, Yod. Guide the light of the 6th Sign that has already been lost due to precession, oh angel with an 8-letter divine name. Drive out the approaching calamity!!”

Yellowish-green light grew from her fingertips.

But before Kamijou could figure out what that meant, the bicycle gear chain moved forward. And just as the head gear turned…

“No! Wait!!”

Index shouted out and the light from the rabbit-ear antennae girl’s fingertips went haywire.

It first seemed to change to a bright red and then it exploded in her hands.

“Uuuh!?”

The girl groaned at her own explosion and the handcuff chain approached next. There was no other option, so Kamijou slammed his fist against the beast.

It noisily burst far too easily and the karma wrapped around his arm once more.

It grew thicker and more sinister.

Fran also grimaced while holding her hands.

“…Why did Aries, the 1st Sign, activate…?”

“They’re working in our heart to change the color scheme we picture in our head! The handcuff is stagnation and the gear is acceleration. From red to purple, the colors of light separated by the glass pillar are being flipped around!!”

A high school boy like Kamijou had no way of judging how dangerous this was, but it seemed to make people lose control of their magic.

And if magic was no use, they would have to rely on Kamijou even more.

With a thunk, a handcuff ring fell from empty air and produced a new rainbow chain.

There was no time to wait around.

But after being shaken so many times in a row, Kamijou’s attention had slipped.

He had not noticed that Tsuchimikado Motoharu, the blond sunglasses boy who had been standing right next to him, had disappeared.

A dreadful roar burst out.

A giant yellow crane truck slammed through the surrounding chains.

It weighed more than 10 tons.

The mass of steel plowed through with the full speed provided by its diesel engine, bowling all of the assassins out of the way.

And *he* was of course the one driving it.

“Get on!!”

“You say that, but there’s only the single box seat, Tsuchimikado!!”

Kamijou had no choice but to push on Maika and Fran’s butts to get them up on the side, grab Index’s hand and pull her up with him, and cling to the side like a rescue team on a firetruck. Without asking if they were ready, the unprecedented sunglasses brother worked the giant shift lever with a grinding sound and got the ultra-heavyweight monster going again.

He ran back over the rainbow chains that were squirming along the road and broke free of them with Kamijou and the others holding onto the crane truck.

Kamijou glanced back while an intense wind washed over his body.

“Dammit, they’re getting right back up!”

“I doubt there’s any simple way to kill them besides your Imagine Breaker, Kami-yan. For one thing, we’re talking about magic on Aleister’s level…but there’s also the fact that they’re so narrowly targeted, nyah.”

Tsuchimikado kept talking in the driver’s seat.

He sounded like he had expected something this bizarre.

“Either way, we have to get to the Windowless Building in District 7. So let’s just floor it!!”

“…”

The ultra-heavyweight crane truck could move pretty fast once it got up to speed. The handcuff and gear assassins were growing smaller as they pursued from behind. Kamijou and the others left the unmanned container yard wrapped in deathly silence and charged right into the urban region which was full of life.

But the crisis was not over.

“Wah!? What, what?”

The maid girl was at the center of it all, but Maika did not seem to sense the danger as she clung to the crane truck in confusion.

Orange sparks occasionally scattered from the road. Gears and handcuff rings were falling from nowhere and crashing into the asphalt. But they must not have been able to keep up with the speed because they were left in the dust before they could take actual form.

“What the hell!? Is there just an unlimited number of them!?”

“No, they aren’t physical objects in the first place,” explained Index. “Once one can’t follow us anymore, it loses its form to replenish the stock! The framework should just be the one pair of 2!”

But they could not let their guard down or relax.

Just because their speed was enough to lose the rainbow chains did not mean the enemy would go away. And if the stocked gear or handcuff would continue to appear somewhere around Maika, putting distance between them was meaningless. It was like gaining a lead in a relay race only to have the opponent’s next runner start running early.

Just letting them attack was out of the question, but carelessly defeating them came with a penalty. Plus, destroying them would only increase the stock. Flooring it and fleeing was the only option.

“There’s something odd about this,” said Othinus from Kamijou’s shoulder. “It’s definitely a nasty technique, but it isn’t very decisive. It’s almost like sending pursuers after us to place on some kind of preset rails. Like a hound chasing a wild rabbit.”

Kamijou was shocked.

“Are you suggesting this Aleister guy is luring us into the Windowless Building?”

“No, that would be meaningless. You might not be aware of it, but the Windowless Building is the center of the science side. It’s the core that he can’t allow to be taken. If he can determine a course for us and lure us there, he would only have to guide us into a dead-end alleyway and have us beaten up there.”

“This is how he does things,” cut in Tsuchimikado from the driver’s seat. “Victory and defeat, success and failure, acquisition and loss, glory and setbacks. They’re all the same thing to Aleister Crowley. No matter the result when you roll the die, his goal is achieved *as long as he can guide that result in a single direction.* That’s

what he truly believes. A normal person would have given up after failing so spectacularly in summoning Coronzon, but it only got him more fired up."

Kamijou sensed some kind of powerful current.

They were desperately struggling to climb up onto the bank, but the torrent of water had them in its grip and would not let go. The more they tried, the more it swept them downstream as if to mock them.

"…"

Tsuchimikado drove the crane truck through the city while running all the red lights and breaking through the railroad crossing bars that lowered and gave off a shrill noise.

No matter how much land it covered, it was still just one city.

It did not take long to reach District 7 from District 11.

The rabbit-ear antennae girl spoke up when she saw the former entrance.

"Found it."

"Kami-yan, where's the entrance!?"

"I-it's this rectangular opening in the road…oh, right! It's near the withered tree over-…!!"

The nyah-nyah sunglasses boy did not wait for him to finish speaking. He pulled the hand brake, swung the giant truck around, and released what the crane was carrying: a gigantic wrecking ball.

The built-up centrifugal force was used to swing the extra-large morning star into the entrance to the underground area which was closed tight and disguised as asphalt. The destructive power was great enough for the 10-ton crane truck to rise up so only the wheels on one side touched the ground. It was unclear how many locks or deadbolts had kept it shut, but that blow created a nice rectangular opening.

Tsuchimikado somehow managed to get all the truck's wheels back on the road and then drove right down the slope.

They could not forget that the gears and handcuff rings were continuing to be created around Maika as she clung to the crane truck. No amount of accelerating and fleeing would bring them safety.

The tires tore at the ground as the crane truck drove to the lowest level.

The brakes screeched and they found the same vast space as before. This was Kihara Yuiitsu's fortress where she had ruled over 100 girls with a single right hand.

It was strange.

This cave of ruin and disaster had transformed into a path of hope for them.

(Come to think of it, Yuiitsu just kind of *disappeared*, didn't she? …Oh!?)

Kamijou was just about thrown from the truck and he looked up to see countless rocket boosters hanging down like stalactites. They were all damaged and a large wound had opened. That was their way into the impregnable Windowless Building.

"…"

Hoodie Bikini Fran looked at the hole overhead like she was staring up at the sun.

This opening had been given to them by Kamisato Kakeru who was no longer here. What feelings did this bring to the small girl who had brought her love to an end?

"We don't have time!"

Tsuchimikado shouted that at them as he placed the crane truck's support legs on the ground and extended the arm. Yes, once the truck stopped, they could not escape those 2 chain monsters that appeared around Maika no matter where they were. The pair that was catching up from behind would reach them. But the more they defeated, the more of that unknown karmic penalty Kamijou would bear.

That meant they had to keep moving.

"Are we really doing this…!?"

"You can't tell me you're afraid of heights after jumping from the dorm and skydiving from a plane, Kami-yan!!"

The diagonally extended crane arm was a modern day Jack and the Beanstalk. There were no railings or lifelines. One slip and they would tumble straight toward the solid ground.

Kamijou could only think of one way to force his thoughts in a positive direction:

Q1: Which is better, falling from a great height or being slowly tormented to death by those creepy rainbow chains?

“Oh, hell!! Those are some awful choices!!”

He knew what he had to do.

Tsuchimikado grabbed into the crane arm and took the lead. Just like a mountain climbing guide, he was showing the others how it was done. Next were Index, Maika, and Fran. Kamijou went last.

(Although I can’t exactly catch them if they tumble backwards…)

He had enough tact not to say that out loud.

As the hoodie bikini girl went ahead of him, the soccer ball antenna on her butt waved back and forth, but then she covered her little butt with one hand.

And he heard the cursed words.

“…What do you think you’re looking at, you perverted dung beetle low-angle peeping tom?”

“A swimsuit doesn’t count as underwear! And there’s nothing sexy about a girl who wears shorts in the middle of winter!!”

“Please do not criticize my fashion sense when you have no taste whatsoever!!”

The heavy handcuff ring and gear still fell around Maika as they climbed the crane arm, but it was a narrow crane. With nothing to grab onto, they simply vanished far below.

But there was no time to relax. The beasts with rainbow chain skeletons and transparent flesh and blood also began climbing the arm.

“! Really!?”

Kamijou kicked down the gear chain when it got close. He did not have to bear the mysterious karma as long as he did not use Imagine Breaker, but that meant he could not finish them off. Knocking them down from this height would not kill them.

But that did keep him too preoccupied to be bound by a fear of heights.

The next thing he knew, they had made it quite a ways up and they successfully climbed inside through a damaged booster.

But if there was a way in, their opponents could continue their pursuit.

“Outta the way, Kami-yan!!”

Tsuchimikado moved forward.

He ignored the way his blood vessels bulged out at his temple.

“Black of the Five Elements, remove the barrier like the surging of the water dragon. (Hey, delinquent. Wake the hell up and get to work.)”

As soon as he released a dragon made from a small piece of origami, the handcuff ring inside one of the beasts opened and closed.

They were changing the color of the magic so Tsuchimikado would lose control.

But…

“Losing control was part of the plan!!”

He pushed it through regardless.

The giant water gun blast that grew in that space wrapped around Tsuchimikado’s surroundings and slammed into the end of the crane arm. The arm and the ultra-heavyweight crane truck were knocked onto their side. The beanstalk was felled and the ghouls clinging to it were knocked down with it.

“Bh…”

“Aniki? What is it, Aniki!? You’re covered in blood!!”

“…Bwh.”

Unable to answer Maika’s shocked words, Tsuchimikado doubled over and coughed up a lot of blood. His entire body was tormented by the side effects of being a magician who was also developed as an esper.

And there was no set value for how many times he could take this side effect.

He might be able to survive it 100 times, or he might die after the first time because it caused one of his heart’s blood vessels to burst. He was trapped by those unreasonable Russian roulette rules.

“They can’t follow us…” he said while wiping off his mouth. “Not unless they can grow wings like angels or demons…”

That was when they heard a dry clattering sound.

“But unless we solve Maika’s problem, those handcuff and gear rainbow chains will continue to appear. We need to keep moving. We’ll be trapped otherwise!!”

Part 3

The A.A.A.

The Anti-Art Attachment.

Misaka Mikoto should have had nothing to do with that term. She had originally acquired it by pure happenstance. But the truth remained that she was growing dependent on it.

However, there was still a lot she did not know about it.

It had apparently been one of the reasons by Kihara Yuiitsu had brought an army of Elements to thoroughly destroy Tokiwadai Middle School. And it may have been her taking a step “deeper” into the A.A.A. that had highlighted her as a threat and led to something as strange as a curse targeting her.

“So I’m the same as those girls,” began Mikoto anew.

They were in a burger shop outside the School Garden. Instead of a chain with restaurants everywhere, it was a small shop at the top of a small multi-tenant building. The narrow stairs up to it made her question just who it was welcoming. In fact, it did not even have a sign out front. If she did not know better, she would have thought it was an office full of frightening-looking men.

Shokuhou Misaki had brushed back her honey-blonde hair and made the following smug announcement in front of the restaurant.

“Not every restaurant in the School Garden is all that good. A lot of them will dump in preservatives, dyes, artificial sweeteners, beef tallow, or lard and hope you don’t notice. Not letting the appearance fool you and locating the places that serve real food is how you prove your worth as a person.”

“Yes, yes. You’re so wonderful for knowing about a good hole-in-the-wall place. Wonderful, wonderful.”

“…Busuu.”

“Why are you acting cute all of a sudden? Do you mentally regress when someone looks down on you or something?”

But back to the present.

It was like a scene from TV where what looks like a perfectly normal apartment room turns out to be a fancy French restaurant that rejects first-time customers. Mikoto had no choice but to rub the other girl’s head, which caused the queen to puff out her cheeks like rice cakes. But that aside…

“Munch, munch☆”

The flavor must have been linked to happy memories for her because Shokuhou Misaki childishly bit into the extra-large burger with a smile. Mikoto continued the discussion from the seat diagonally across the table.

“When a power falls in your lap out of the blue and forces you to be aware of its presence, it tends to throw you for a loop. But to be honest, I’m pretty clearly a few laps behind in some invisible world. And I can’t climb up onto the stage without the strange power of the A.A.A.”

“Misaka-san.”

The burger was too big to eat all at once, so the #5 set it back down on the tray, stuck out her little tongue to lick the grease from her lips, used her straw to take a sip of a soda made from spring water, reached for the fries, and spoke with exasperation in her voice.

“So where’s the core of this problem ability? Ohh, I’m just so frightening now that I’ve gained this incredible power! …Are you just losing yourself in that feeling???”

“…In a way, I have to thank you, Shokuhou. You’re probably the only person in Tokiwadai who will speak with me so frankly.”

“I mean…” Shokuhou held a fry out toward Mikoto’s mouth. “Weigh the 2

options: gain this power, or don't gain it. Is there any way the latter option would be of any use?"

"Ahm."

"…Y-you actually ate it. That's honestly something of a letdown."

"With someone as black-hearted as you eating them so readily, it's obvious they aren't harmful."

But she did not seem to notice the waitress pouring chilled water from a pitcher at another table who began blushing as the water overflowed the glass.

"To get back on topic, if there is a price for using the A.A.A., you've already paid it and the risk won't just go away if you stop using it now, right? And that's true whether it's something physical or some kind of, um…curse?"

"Uh, but isn't it a little much to keep using it like crazy on that reasoning? Just because you swallowed one anti-drowsiness pill doesn't mean it's okay to chug the whole bottle after learning what they are."

"That's not what I meant. Normal hospitals aren't going to tell you anything with the A.A.A.'s side effects or the curse's lingering effects, right? Then isn't the only way to rest easy to analyze the A.A.A. yourself? With a suspicious tablet or supplement, you could send a sample to the appropriate agency, but since there's no one like that in this case, won't you just have to do it yourself?"

"…Well, yes, I suppose."

Mikoto pouted her lips like a child and Shokuhou breathed a heavy sigh when she saw it from the diagonal seat.

She leaned back in her chair and reached out her long legs to mess with Mikoto's feet below the table.

"This tends to be how it works when someone asks for advice, doesn't it? You already have the answer half-formed in your mind, but you're afraid of placing all the responsibility on your own shoulders, so you push it onto someone else's back to distribute the burden. It's nothing but a disaster for those of us who kindly listen to your worries. I mean, we have to bear a portion of the responsibility for something we're not even doing."

"…"

"Honestly, what a waste of time. If you weren't *like that*, Misaka-san, I could drag

out what you really thought at the touch of a remote button and this would all be over. Why do I have to be the #5 while you're the #3?"

"Then why did you decide to hear me out?"

"Why else? How is this connected to that pointy-haired boy?"

Part 4

The Windowless Building.

Kamijou's group had come to that giant space in order to find a way to get rid of the shadow sword stabbing into Maika's chest since neither Index nor Othinus knew what to do about it. They had to infiltrate Aleister Crowley's fortress, find some documents related to the spell he had created, and use that to calculate out some new magic that would neutralize or eliminate it.

(But I can't believe the person at the top of Academy City, headquarters of the science side, was a magician…)

Kamijou gave a belatedly gulp at the twisted structure of the world.

The Windowless Building's internal structure was far from normal.

Its length and width were fine. It was about the size of a school gym. If there were no internal walls, that size was nothing out of the ordinary.

The problem was the height.

Kamijou could not see the top.

No matter how high he looked, nothing like a ceiling was in evidence. It was all wrapped in darkness. He doubted this was possible even if the entire building was one giant open space. It almost looked like a pit or vertical tunnel that was connected to outer space or another dimension. The scale was one only found in mountain climbing.

"We already knew the Windowless Building was a giant rocket," whispered Othinus from his shoulder. "It should have lost its ability to escape the planet with the rocket boosters gone, but did it go beyond that? The internal space is being

extended to connect to the destination coordinates. That's what created this strange spatial structure that surpasses Euclid."

"This isn't the Sephiroth or the Qliphoth… It's almost like a unique third tree built up from scratch…"

Kamijou had no idea what they were talking about, but the rainbow chain beasts were still being created from the gears and handcuffs around Maika. Defeating them without thinking was dangerous and they could not come to a stop, so the group had to continue up.

"There are some stairs over there!"

That was all Kamijou shouted before leading the way. The stairs spiraled around the inside of the building's outer wall. In addition to the stairs were an escalator and even a small open elevator like the kind used at construction sites or in mines. He smacked indoorsy Fran on the head when she reached for the elevator button. They did not have time to wait, so he led the way to the stairs.

The internal structure did not follow any kind of logic.

The structure only continued up and up and up. There seemed to be a lot of paths where the landing branched off both up and down, but it all led in the same direction in the end. It felt like being set on a single predetermined path.

"Hey! Tsuchimikado!!"

"What, nyah!?"

"You often hear about escaping upwards being a bad idea in fires, right!? It feels like we're running into a dead end here!"

"Then do you want to stop here and get caught in the flames!? Just hurry!!"

They seemed to be safely escaping, but Kamijou could not rid himself of an unpleasant feeling like they were growing more and more tangled in a spider's web. He sensed an indescribable dead-end like he would draw the short straw whether he won or lost the game of rock-paper-scissors.

His initial feelings about all this were still with him.

It was that danger without subjective symptoms seen in Maika from the moment the condensed shadow sword had stabbed through her chest.

He should have been glad she was not in pain, but the lack of pain made it feel

like they were being mocked.

(Damn, it feels like nothing we're doing is having any effect. I can't tell if we're headed in the right direction or not!!)

But even if they were only running up some stairs or a stopped escalator, the exhaustion was incredible when there was no goal in sight. It felt like a combination of mountain climbing and a marathon. To escape the rainbow chain beasts with gear or handcuff heads, they were running full speed without thinking of pacing themselves, so their bodies were naturally growing unsteady.

Kamijou found himself reaching for the railing of the large spiral staircase.

Then something strange happened.

With no prior warning, the metal railing broke off like it was made of sugar.

"H-…!!!???"

He had tried to say "hey" because doubt and irritation arrived before fear. But there was no changing it now that it had happened. His hand swam through empty air in search of something to grab onto, but he could not make the necessary correction after fully placing his body weight on the railing.

He tumbled out past the railing.

The violent gravity produced by the planet became deadly hairs that tangled all around Kamijou Touma's body.

Part 5

It was a world of fog.

"…Huh?"

Hadn't he just taken a dive into the void along with the broken railing? This was another unreasonable turn of events, but relief filled his body when he felt solid ground supporting his feet. He felt some faint unease at how empty it all seemed, like he was trying to fill his stomach with a feast visible through VR goggles, but… it still went a long way to restrain the pressure on his heart.

Kamijou moved each limb in turn to confirm that nothing was broken.

“Where am I…? Othinus? Huh? Othinus?”

He realized the Magic God was gone from his shoulder.

Had she been thrown off when he made the dive? If not… He tried to think of other options, but found nothing. Then again, he had no idea how to explain his current situation, so of course he could not come up with any theories.

He heard what sounded like a bug zapper flashing on and off.

And then he heard a graceful female voice through the fog.

“It begins…”

What begins?

Before he could ask, he sensed a presence.

But it was not the women he had heard through the fog. Several mocking children’s voices reached him from a different direction.

They were energetic, but they were not at all bright or cheerful.

In fact, this was the torrent of negativity unique to childhood that hid the kind of sadism that would tear off an insect’s legs one at a time.

That was all he sensed at first and it felt like an invisible wall pressing in on him.

And at that point, he finally realized the language was distanced from him. The previous woman and these children seemed to be speaking English, and yet he could understand them just fine. It might be a clichéd explanation, but the meaning behind the words played over them like a second sound channel.

“Teacher, he sleeps with his hands under the blanket!”

“He’s touched in the head! It’s because he doesn’t believe in god!!”

“Edward, come here. Apologize for making everyone uneasy!!”

(…? What is this???)

It sounded like they were ganging up on and criticizing someone, but Kamijou did not understand what it was about. If they were making it up, surely they could

have come up with a better story than that. It did not even make sense to stretch the truth for this.

But the several silhouettes visible through the fog did not doubt they stood on the side of justice. They were only thinking of dragging someone down from the stage and making that person bow down to them.

This was majority rule.

It was a small miniature garden where that decision was all that mattered.

No matter how unreasonable it was, that cage of rules would reject you if you did not work to fit in.

The sticky atmosphere was like a soaked blanket.

“Just how foolish are they…?” whispered a voice.

Someone already stood by Kamijou’s side. It was a skinny boy with silver hair. He was much smaller than Kamijou. His juvenile face showed only bitterness and frustration. He did not seem able to see Kamijou. Kamijou was apparently only the audience.

The fog whirled around.

A male and a female silhouette with adult heights were shouting something beyond the fog.

“Why do you refuse to listen to us!?”

“We thought sending you to a strict boarding school would help you understand the teachings of god!!”

“Edward, oh, Edward! Just how stupid are you!?”

…For some reason.

He had nothing to base this on, but Kamijou thought he could see what was going on here. Those adults must have been the ones who were meant to protect the silver-haired boy. But they had been so focused on ensuring he acted “proper” that they grew lax in that duty. They had fully believed that letting a strict school take care of him would place a strict spirit in him.

The boy spoke.

“Even those who believe in god and proclaim themselves to be righteous can act so disgracefully?”

Could they hear him or not?

Something was thrown into the fog. It was a porcelain flower pot full of water.

It was going to hit the silver-haired boy in the face.

“Kh.”

So Kamijou instinctually reached out and caught it. He felt the heavy impact in his wrist. He gasped at the dull pain. He still did not understand what all this was, but he knew he could not let his guard down. If someone wielded a knife in this fog, it could kill him.

And the silver-haired boy did not even glance in his direction.

This was like a movie, so no one could even perceive Kamijou’s presence.

“Then reading through the bible must not lead to the truth. When you cast aside your own thoughts and blindly believe the teachings of those who came before you, you only gain that disgraceful behavior.”

That boy had seen the “other side” of the people praised as saints and treated like the perfect role models.

His heart must have been a dark mass of solidified doubt and scorn.

The silver-haired boy spoke with a voice that seemed to burn with a dark flame.

“Then I will find the truth. I will reclaim the former path that was lost in their foolish blind belief.”

Just as something like sparks seemed to flash before Kamijou’s eyes, the fog and the silver-haired boy vanished.

In fact, Kamijou Touma had never fallen in the first place. He felt the solid sensation of the metal railing in his hand and it supported his weight.

He was back on the stairs. The same stairs as before.

“What is it, Touma? You zoned out there for a second.”

“If we don’t get going, the rainbow chains will catch up!”

(…?)

He was urged on by Index and Fran, but Kamijou's head was full of questions. He instinctually reached for his right shoulder to confirm the presence of the 15cm fairy there. He stroked the top of her small head through her hat.

"Stop it, human. Don't play with me in front of so many people. There is a time and a place for this kind of thing!!"

He could feel her there.

Othinus really was there.

So…what did that mean? What was the meaning of the vision he had seen while Othinus was not on his shoulder???

But despite the questions filling his mind, he did not have time to figure any of it out.

Just as the girls had warned him, Maika – or rather, the painless short sword piercing her chest – had the power to produce those gear and handcuff monsters. If they stayed in one place for too long, they would be trapped between the pair of beasts.

On a landing where the stairs, escalator, and elevator complexly intertwined, several of those bloody monsters appeared. The way forward and back were both blocked, so they had to break through.

Tsuchimikado immediately pulled out a few pieces of origami.

"Tch! Kami-yan, you look after Maika!! As long as you don't use Imagine Breaker, we don't have to think about the karma!!"

"Wait, Tsuchimikado! You still have the damage from before. And Index, you support Fran. She's a magician, so she should be able to make use of your knowledge!!"

It was frightening having the beasts attack in a group, but each individual one was not that powerful. So Kamijou's judgment was not all that wrong.

(Huh?)

However.

That was only if their assumptions were correct.

(Were there *three of them* before?)

One of the chain beasts suddenly burst from within. Just because the background was visible through them did not mean there was nothing inside. The light had been bent to hide a “human” with waist-length silver hair and a green surgical gown. He looked like both a man and a woman, like both an adult and a child, and like both a saint and a sinner. At close range, he gently held his right hand out toward them. 32, 30, 10. As if he were striking the flint in a lighter, small numbers scattered from his hand.

His fingers took a familiar form.

He clenched a fist and then stuck out his thumb and forefinger.

In other words…

(…A handgun…?)

Just as Kamijou thought that, the world was filled with horrific destructive power.

The handcuff chain beast in the way was torn to pieces and blown away as “something” flew toward them. Whatever-it-was flew far too fast for the human eye to follow. Just like wheat swaying as the invisible wind blew through, its presence was only just barely apparent thanks to the destroyed beast.

“Ooooowahhhhhhh!!!???” roared Tsuchimikado.

There may have been no logical reason and it may have only been a ritual to tear apart the chains of fear binding his legs.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu took a step forward, brought his hands together in front of his chest, and held up an origami phoenix.

The invisible “something” was deflected by an invisible barrier.

He had truly bet his life on that resistance.

But it did not end there. Hadn’t Tsuchimikado himself said that Aleister Crowley was not picky about victory or defeat, success or failure, acquisition or loss, and glory or setbacks? That no matter the result, he could guide it all in a single direction?

Deflecting the attack caused it to burst and scatter in every direction.

And it evenly assaulted Kamijou’s group who should have been protected.

As his entire body was pummeled, the pointy-haired boy's rattled head lost all sense of direction. He could not tell what had happened to the girls standing right next to him. In fact, he could not even feel the ground. Kamijou was in an extreme predicament, but he felt something oddly familiar.

Yes.

It was the same as before.

He was falling.

Kamijou Touma fell without end.

Between the Lines 1

The propaganda and negative campaigns from the Christian church died out due to the rampant criticism calling the witch hunts immoral and inhumane. And to replace that, they were instead attacked by the third-rate newspapers with no morals or compliance rules that were starting to make an appearance at the time.

All sorts of things were written about them: that they still boiled babies in pots for their experiments, that they held obscene ceremonies with men and women all mixed together, etc. (Ironically, the attempts to discover the truth about them actually hid the truth of what magicians were.) So from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, *true* magicians began drawing out definite rules for their research and experiments.

You must not use any living creature as an ingredient for an experiment.

Simply put, magic circles using animal or human blood and potions using fat or internal organs were banned. Some might find this odd. Aren't frogs, newts, pigeons, and bats the standard ingredients for "wicked witches" to put in their cauldrons in children's books?

Were the actual magicians actually perfectly pure and nothing like the image of them someone had invented? Or had such things grown so common that everyone would have done them if they had not made some civilized rules?

Everyone can come to their own conclusions on that question.

And just because they had rules did not mean those acts themselves went away. There were some who would break the rules to reach their goal.

And that leads us to a certain “human”.

On a trip to Africa, that magician used the blood of 3 pigeons to draw a magic circle in an attempt to pass from one sephirah to another. To pass through the abyss between them, he wished to become one with the abyss so he would not take any spiritual damage as he accomplished his goal.

How did that turn out?

Whether it succeeded or failed, human society came into contact with a certain name at that time.

That demon is designated with 8 letters, beginning with C.

That being was not contained by the existing Qliphoth and even broke the controlling chains of the man with a bestial magic name.

Chapter 3: Golden – A.D.1900_Invisible_War.

Part 1

This time, he did not immediately arrive in the world of fog.

He was falling headfirst. An endless sensation of falling squeezed at his heart and a female voice slipped softly into his ear.

“Do you understand now?”

“Understand…what!?”

Were reality and illusion mixing together again? He touched his right shoulder as he fell headfirst, but there was no sign of his understander there.

“Falling is a stereotypical method of entering hypnosis. And it need not be anything specialized. For example, have you ever suddenly woken after a standard ‘falling dream’?”

“Hyp…nosis?”

“Well, something like it. It’s actually a complex intertwining of falsehood and fact, like a mixture of animal magnetism and hypnotherapy.”

So what was happening? Kamijou’s head was full of questions as someone else appeared alongside him, also upside-down.

It was a young and beautiful woman in mourning clothes with a translucent veil over her face. However, she had such magnificent bodylines that they were apparent even through the black clothing.

…Or was that who this was? Sandstorm-like static would occasionally run through her and, each time it did, a black cat vision seemed to overlap with her.

He focused his eyes on her more to distract himself from the fear of the fall than to figure out who she was, but that still caused the two images to align.

“What in the hell? A grown woman has cat ears growing from her head…?”

“That must be the most satisfactory appearance for you. You can call me Mina, Mrs. Mathers, or the Black Cat Witch. I was also known as the heretic painter and the founder’s understander, but each name only points to a fragment of who I am.”

No matter what she said, the vision no longer changed. In fact, she grew something like a tail from her hipline, making her even more catlike.

“That’s super unbalanced… What is this? I feel like I’m seeing a female teacher with twintails.”

“Odd. My appearance should be automatically adjusting to the one you will most easily accept.”

The veiled woman’s expression did not change in the slightest.

And was she influencing him? He was still falling toward almost certain death with no plan, but for some reason, he felt his fear fading. Since she was so calm, he began wondering if there was a safety net or a pool of gelatin to catch them. … Although this may have been like wearing VR goggles to view some beautiful scenery while driving full speed toward the edge of a cliff.

“It is obvious why Aleister Crowley constructed me within his own palace. And you already know the answer, don’t you?”

“Hey, can you stop pretending I know what you’re talking about? You clearly don’t think I do! You just want to explain it all to me!!”

“To Aleister Crowley, I…or rather, *we* are all enemies, trauma, and symbols of setback. But that must be why he has chosen to continue tearing open that wound to preserve his own purity. That is why I am here.”

“Continue tearing open…that wound…?”

“As for why he chose me over Mathers or Westcott, I can only assume he viewed me as relatively reasonable and sensible. I can guess he decided that making me the host would allow him to assemble the more difficult people such as Waite and Regardie.”

“What, what, what!? One at a time, please. Mathers? Regardie? These Western names mean nothing to me! Who are these people!? I’m not going to remember any of it if you just mention some friends of Mozart and Beethoven out of the blue! Especially when I’m kinda falling headfirst toward the ground!!”

“Oh, honestly. You don’t seem to understand at all, but I will continue on regardless.”

“Cat-ear hag, if you want to explain stuff, how about taking responsibility and doing it right!?”

“Golden.” She cut him off with that single word. “That largest of magic cabals combined the DNA of Hermeticism and Rosicrucianism, gathered the world’s greatest minds, and repeatedly made history’s greatest discoveries and accomplishments. Starting with the 3 founders such as Westcott and Mathers, people like Waite, Regardie, and Bennett gathered in one place for a truly miraculous group. And.”

“…And?”

“*Aleister Crowley destroyed it all and returned the magic cabal to mere ashes.* Thus, I and all the others are the trauma of his defeat and setbacks.”

With no warning, the falling sensation ended.

Kamijou’s eyes widened in surprise and he felt solid ground below his feet. White fog surrounded him in every direction. But unlike before, he could see through it. The scenery was instantly rewritten and a world only seen in old movies spread out before his eyes.

Dirty white steam and sooty smoke blew through a city of brick and stone pavement. The darkness of the night was illuminated by old-fashioned gas lights. A balled-up scrap of paper rolled along in the damp wind. It was a lot like the tumbleweed in Westerns. Kamijou staggered and stepped on it. And it said the following:

London Shocking Times.

April 1900. The day was illegible because the paper was wet and torn.

“…1900? London???”

The newspaper’s ink was running far more than a modern one would, so the small English writing was illegible.

Kamijou looked up and checked the signs around, but he did not know what any of them meant. He could just barely grasp that one of them was a street sign and he tried to read the string of letters there.

“Bl…Blith…Bluth? What is this???”

“36 Blythe Road, Hammersmith. To magic researchers, this was a crucial but quiet turning point of history.”

He suddenly realized the Black Cat Witch was shockingly close by. His nose sensed something odd. He could not explain exactly what, but he may have picked up on a faint scent.

A great many black cats swarmed around the mourning clothes woman’s feet like her shadow. And as she brought that ominousness with her, Mrs. Mathers whispered to him.

“Well, I was known as the Black Cat Witch.”

“That’s a pretty straightforward interpretation.”

“I was also an artist, so I might be carrying the scent of art supplies or oil.”

“You’re pretty cheap, Black Cat Witch!”

The veiled woman remained nonchalant despite Kamijou Touma’s sharp comment.

“This place became the stage of a war.”

“1900? …What happened then? That’s too early for World War One, isn’t it?”

“And it was known as the Battle of Blythe Road.”

Mystery men were rampant in this foggy city of steam and sooty smoke. And someone silently appeared beyond the fog.

The Black Cat Witch spoke as if she were celebrating the appearance of the star in a movie.

“That was when Aleister Crowley went straight for Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and declared war on the main branch of the Golden cabal, leading to an armed conflict between magicians *that was recorded in actual history.*”

Part 2

“…!?”

Kamijou Touma woke up.

…Or was that the right way to describe it? Regardless, he once more found himself on the stairway attached to the Windowless Building’s wall. This too was an alternate dimensional space that extended infinitely upwards. Asking which one was real would not lead to a clear answer.

(Tsuchimikado…protected everyone from Aleister, then we were blown away, and, um, what happened!? Where is he now!?)

As his mind started working once more, Kamijou’s panic accelerated. Yes, there was no sign of his awful friend with blond hair and sunglasses.

No.

It went beyond that. There was no one else here.

“Index?”

There was no response.

“Othinus!?”

He reached for his right shoulder, but he did not feel his understander there.

…Even the pair of gear and handcuff beasts and the person camouflaged as an impossible third one were gone.

They had probably been meant to trip up Tsuchimikado, so were they gone because Maika was not here?

“There is no need to beat around the bush and refer to him as “the person”. That is Aleister Crowley.”

“Wah!?”

When he felt a sudden breath on his ear, Kamijou forgot he was on an elevated stairway and fell right onto his butt.

“The many stairways and ladders are likely a symbol of mountain climbing made from urban materials. He repeatedly measured his limits with a variety of methods: magic, drugs, yoga, and mountain climbing to name a few.”

Something.

Something was there.

“But that can also be misinterpreted as demonstrating the possibility to surpass and expand his limits.”

Mourning clothes, cat ears, and a tail. The young and beautiful woman brought a large group of black cats instead of a shadow and a hint of art supplies and oil tickled at his nose.

Mina Mathers should only have existed in the illusion, yet here she was!?

“What!? Have I not escaped that yet!? Huh? Wait, which one is the real world!?”

“That is an extremely philosophical question, but there is no real reason to distinguish between the two. Even without the example of the Four Worlds indicated by seven candles, the world always has many overlapping layers.”

“? ???”

“Although I suppose someone with a soul as low-level as yours would indeed be trapped by the visions of the physical world. Those chains are the mountain’s devilishness that reaches for human karma and they are the power that binds human thoughts and leads them to ascend the mountain, but they must have also provided a reassuring push on the back.”

“Well, the one thing I do understand is that you’re mocking me.”

Someone who loved explaining things had no way to fulfill that desire without someone to talk to, so this woman might have been lonely. With those silly thoughts rattling around his head, Kamijou started to gulp.

“Oh? I see your spiritual activity is directed toward a higher level now. With that much of an imagination, you might just be able to reach a Tattva vision.”

“Don’t you underestimate a full-on adolescent mind, cat-ear hag! I’ll strip you bare in my mind!!”

“Doing battle at a higher level of spiritual activity is a surprisingly simple task.”

“?”

“By which I mean…flash.”

“A black garter belt!?”

“A single visual will solidify their image, trap them, and rob them of their freedom. Using that to seal off the cards in their deck and drive them into a dead end is one form of magic battle. See? You can’t picture anything other than sexy lingerie now, can you? You can only picture an elegant and glamorous lifestyle…”

“Dammit, I can only imagine a smug young woman!? But this looks like the model in a fashion magazine for office ladies. That’s just a boring image of the pre-established harmony. I can’t let a complete stranger take away my fantasies! If I’m going to embarrass her, it’s gotta be some strawberry panties that don’t suit her at all! Burn, my adolescence!!”

“Yes, that is the first step toward a vision. A beginner must first overcome this.”

Kamijou Touma was led around by the young woman, but this was no time to be holding a high-level spiritual battle(?).

“Wait, I can’t be focused on strawberry panties right now! What happened to Tsuchimikado!? Index, Othinus, and Maika are gone too, but are they okay!? Did they disappear or was it me that wandered off somewhere? Having weird fantasies isn’t going to make anything materialize, so whose world is this!?”

“The world is simply the world. It belongs to no one.”

“Again!! This isn’t the time for a Zen dialogue!!”

“Which of course means it does not belong to Aleister Crowley.”

“?”

She spoke in a confusing conceptual way that provided no concrete answers, but that phrase caught in Kamijou’s mind.

“You mean…what…eh? But isn’t this the Windowless Building, his headquarters…?”

“Aleister Crowley has no intention of overcoming the trauma that he has perfectly recreated. And he does not care if he has setbacks or failures. So he does not maintain control over the very miniature garden he created. That is why I am able to speak with you.”

Her phrasing was a pain to deal with, but did that mean Aleister was writhing around while viewing the trauma he had created himself? That sounded like someone with belonephobia climbing inside an iron maiden…

“What is that Aleister guy trying to do…?”

“He believes in power. But he does not distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, correct and incorrect. Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of Thelema. Even if a great many people call that power evil or wrong, he will not hesitate to reach for it so long as it will achieve his goal. That is the kind of ‘human’ Aleister Crowley is.”

“…Give me a simple example.”

“People hate roaches. But that hatred is so strong that it produced the power leading to the development of insecticides and sticky tape. That is what I mean.”

Aleister Crowley’s soul was constantly worn away by powerful trauma, but did he see the intensity of that hatred and disgust as the source of a power strong enough to carry him down his own path? Did he see Mina and the other Golden magicians as a source of unconditional and biological revulsion, just like a cockroach?

“No,” said the woman.

“Hey, you’re getting ahead of yourself, explainer. Don’t answer me before I say anything.”

“Aleister Crowley fosters his hatred in a much larger framework. He loathes, fears, and mocks the entire planet to an extent that is almost pitiable.”

The entire world.

From a stone on the side of the road to the brightest star twinkling in the sky.

…What kind of life had he lived to expand his biological disgust to that extent? There were some scenes that unconditionally inspired certain emotions in the humans who saw them. For example, a weak baby bird or a kitten in the rain. But Aleister Crowley was unaffected. He hated it all equally. No individual reason was necessary; merely seeing it was enough to trigger a biological reaction.

“He’s different from the Magic Gods who just wanted to live free…”

“Of course. He did not wish to become like them and has remained in the category of ‘human’.”

“?”

“He likely gave up on crossing the abyss after the Coronzon failure, but he also

feels pride in remaining ‘human’.”

She topped off her string of unexplained terminology with a smug look, but Kamijou forced his thoughts to stay focused without wandering off.

(He feels pride in remaining “human”?)

“Yes. No matter how old he grows, he remains very childish.”

“Don’t butt in!! And is this actually a fantasy world of my brain’s creation!? Is that why you can read my mind!? Then become a young woman wearing childish strawberry pantiiiiiies!!”

Nothing happened.

After shouting at the top of his lungs, Kamijou was KO’d. He covered his face with his hands and curled up on the floor.

“…As I was saying, no matter how old they grow, men remain very childish.”

“You just expanded that to include me, didn’t you!?”

Anyway.

“Will you actually gain anything from being here?” wondered the woman. “You clearly have not mastered this path enough to fall toward the answer when you meditate.”

“You might be hiding it behind your fancy words, but I can tell you’re making fun of me.” Kamijou looked to the canopy of endless darkness overhead. “Well, I guess I’ll just have to keep going. If they’re not here, they’re probably somewhere else. And what is that bastard trying to accomplish by making me climb a mountain?”

“Just like real mountain climbing, choosing the wrong route will lead to death, so be careful. And I would assume Aleister is only trying to expand himself.”

Of course, this was only if it was the others who had disappeared, not Kamijou himself. This was completely unprecedented, but with him switching between worlds so often, he could not rely on his own point of view as accurate. In the worst case, he might have to ensure that Index, Maika, and the others were real once he did regroup with them.

“He failed to climb the K2, which is more than 8000m tall, because he gave up after planning out a climbing route but receiving fierce opposition from his fellow

mountain climbers. In other words, to accomplish a difficult feat, he must expand his own existence to the point that he can swallow up others. The rest of you are no more than a part of that."

"I have no idea what that means, but whatever."

The ascent was a long one. Step by step, he walked up the stairs.

…To be honest, he could actually pace himself now that he did not have to flee from the human karma, the mountain's devilishness, or whatever those gear and handcuff beasts appearing around Maika were. That did leave him worried about Maika now that they were separated, but his doubt kept him from making a mad dash up the stairs.

(Surely they didn't escape back down to the bottom…right?)

They had been continuing up and up because the pair of beasts had been pursuing them from below. With the chain skeleton and transparent flesh beasts nowhere to be found, it was impossible to know whether Index, Othinus, and the others would have gone up or down.

The Black Cat Witch politely clasped her hands in front of her as she walked alongside him.

"You will have the answer soon," she whispered.

"Hm? Is someone waiting for me?"

"That is not what I meant."

He felt like he had stepped through the floor.

Then the entire stairway bent like a sugar sculpture exposed to a flame. By this point, he understood what this meant. Falling meant "that" was coming. And Kamijou's movements were the same as someone flailing their hands around after falling from a cliff while wearing VR goggles. He knew somewhere in his heart that it was useless, but his hands still searched for something to grab onto.

And his left hand happened across something incredibly soft.

He had grabbed firmly onto one of a certain someone's twin peaks.

"…That is a yellow card."

"No fair! And since when do you even have a physical body!?"

His vision whirled around.

He did not know what exactly was happening, but the “falling entrance” continued without end…

Part 3

They stood below the cold sky.

“Hoo, hoo.”

Shokuhou Misaki’s legs squirmed as she held her hands to her mouth and blew white breaths. Up ahead, Misaka Mikoto looked back at her with exasperation on her face.

“Have you ever considered exercising more?”

“I’m cold, not out of breath!!”

She was immediately corrected, but Mikoto was having none of that.

“You’re wearing special-made gloves and socks, but it’s still not enough?”

“A girl’s hands and feet are very delicate, so they’re susceptible to the cold ability. Not that I would expect someone as shameless as you to understand.”

“But you seem to have so much subcutaneous fat.”

“…You might wear shorts under your skirt, but cold weather isn’t easy for normal girls.”

“You make it sound like I’m not normal!”

“The worst part is you aren’t even aware of it!”

Illusory sparks seemed to flash between them.

However, there was not much they could do against the chilly December sky.

“Stop being silly and get walking. Moving will warm you u-…”

“Misaka-san, your back is so warrrm.”

“Gyaaaaaahhhhh!!!???”

Mikoto screamed as Shokuhou stuck her chilled hand down the back of her collar.

“You- what- I- Do you want me to start using some real electricity to roast every last part of you…!?”

“Oh, is this a hook?”

“Stop fiddling with that! And don’t twist it! That has nothing to do with keeping warm!!”

“Yes, it does. It makes me happy when your body heat rises. And Misaka-san, you don’t wear a sports bra?”

“Are you seriously picking a fight with me here!?”

But this was not the time to be doing this on the pavement.

Misaka Mikoto had returned to a certain place.

District 11 was the foundation of land transportation and this particular corner was stacked with mountains of containers. She had thought it might have been removed afterwards, but it was still there.

“…This just looks like junk to me,” said Shokuhou. “Even scrap metal from cars would have maintained its shape ability better than this.”

“It’s enough that anything of it is left at all.”

It had originally been enclosed in a container, but “something” had clearly been there. The pile of containers had collapsed and their contents were still scattered across the pavement. If the two girls had arrived a little later, it might have been gathered up along with the other trash for the recovery efforts.

“Hmm. So this is the connection to *his* world.”

The A.A.A.

The Anti-Art Attachment…and an original one at that.

When Mikoto lightly reached out her hand, the mangled metal writhed like a living creature. This was not magnetism, the Lorentz force, or the van der Waals

force. But the dead machine(?) definitely raised its head after confirming the presence of its owner.

“Come to think of it, I’ve been getting weird nosebleeds lately.”

“Are you sure you aren’t just full of fantasy ability?”

Now, it was time to get down to business.

The A.A.A. was right in front of her. But what exactly was it? Misaka Mikoto had built a machine based on the original and customized it for her own uses, but she still did not understand the core or the theory that it used to function.

“Misaka-san. I’m about to smugly explain something even an elementary schooler knows, so don’t laugh, okay?”

“What is it?”

“Guns were brought to this country by castaways from Portugal. Now, how do you think the people of that time figured out how they worked and how to mass-produce them?”

“By thoroughly taking them apart and examining every last piece.”

That was what she did.

Then again, it was already a pile of scraps that had been mangled by several instances of intense violence. She doubted the caution was necessary, but Mikoto still used her power to eliminate all static electricity before facing the sample materials.

“…Well, I was fairly certain I understood most of it when I built my own A.A.A.”

“But that means you didn’t understand all of it, right? Don’t just give up on the parts you couldn’t reverse engineer. Take another stab at it.” Shokuhou gave the pile of metal an exasperated look. “Now, I’m not trying to force gender stereotypes onto you, but fiddling with machines isn’t a very girly hobby. I’m having trouble grasping your sensibilities for letting this fuel your excitement ability.”

“But doesn’t that mean this helps me understand how boys feel?”

“Hm? Are you suggesting this is a chance to better understand *him*? Let’s see, then. What does *his* world look like?”

The queen quickly grew much more diligent.

Mikoto gave instructions as the two of them removed covers, pulled out the contents, and lined them up on the cold asphalt.

“This is it. This is the part I couldn’t understand.” Mikoto pulled out and set down a few electronic parts that looked like wafers or a blade server. It all looked very complex, but the action was much like replacing an air conditioner filter. “There are some transistors and LSIs lined up here, but they’re actually meaningless. The current enters from one end, loops around within the circuit, and then flows right on out. It’s moving all over the place inside, but it’s the same as sending power through a cable wrapped up in a drum. There’s no change to the current or voltage and it isn’t creating a special signal. Hmm, why is it being sent through this layer…?”

“Just looking at the shape, it makes me think of a good luck charm or something. Look, doesn’t it seem like something you’d see in the astrology book that the library master carries around?”

“Let’s say you hook a lightbulb up to a 1.5 volt battery. Do you really think the brightness will change if the wire is a straight line or zigzagging?”

“But what if it produces some kind of invisible field? Doesn’t an electric current create a magnetic field around it? Not that it’s powerful enough to detect under normal circumstances, though.”

“…?”

“And circuits can be used for more than passing current through. They can also be used to catch something. …For example, don’t *antennas* take a lot of different forms? And to more efficiently pick up EM waves, aren’t they sometimes shaped like a mosquito coil or like a bowl? If an ancient person saw one, wouldn’t they think it was some kind of magic circle or something?”

Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki fell quiet and exchanged a glance. Without the necessary foundational knowledge, were these girls in the same position as that hypothetical ancient person?

If so…

“If this crazy magic circle of a wire diagram *is* an antenna, what in the world is it meant to pick up from the air?”

“Whatever it is, it can apparently be converted into an electric signal since this is

built into a circuit. Misaka-san, could you read it by connecting to this pile of junk with your power?”

They had finished the overall analysis of the black box section. If they connected it to something, they might be able to give it power and bring it back to life.

“Shokuhou, do you have a cellphone?”

“Sigh. Who needs to ask a teenage girl that?”

“Eiyah.”

“Why did you break it in half!?”

Shokuhou screamed at the sudden violence, but Mikoto ignored her while pulling a speaker and a few colorful cables out of the broken mobile device. She formed a bridge between the pins on the broken circuit boards and attached the thumbnail-sized speaker that was made to convert the signal running through the line into sound.

“That should do it.”

“…I-I really don’t think we can get along after all.”

“Why are you acting like that’s a huge discovery? Anyway, I’m starting.”

Now she just had to pass her power through it.

When she held out her palm and focused, she sensed something she had not before.

Some quiet static came from the small speaker.

“Are you picking something up?”

“But what in the world is the A.A.A. accessing?”

The answer may have been right in front of their eyes the entire time.

One only needed to read the device’s name.

The Anti-Art Attachment.

The device of someone who wished to eliminate all magic.

Part 4

He was back in the foggy city of London.

But the stinging air from before was gone.

For one thing, he was in a room gently lit by tallow and a fireplace instead of outdoors. Rather than some stately mansion, it was probably an old-fashioned apartment of some kind.

Several men and women were inside.

One sat in a rocking chair next to the fireplace, one sat directly on an ebony desk, and one leaned against the wall instead of sitting.

What was this room?

How was it related to that…Battle of Blythe Road that was mentioned before?

“This is a branch of the Isis-Urania Temple,” whispered Mina Mathers next to him. “It was the prime ceremonial ground of the world-renowned Golden cabal. Although the publicly-known Number 03 was used to hide it.”

“This is…?”

Kamijou looked around once more.

Kamijou lived in a student dorm, but even to him, it only looked like a cramped apartment. Old newspapers were piled up in a corner, a chess set and playing cards were scattered across a desk, and a shelf was lined with bottles of drinks that even a high school boy like him knew were bad for you.

There was no crystal ball lying on a purple cloth and there was no magic circle on the floor. There were some scattered cards, but they were clearly meant for gambling. The gold ring and silver coins lined up with them made that obvious enough.

“This is the world’s best…???”

“The others and I did not seek worldly riches. We saw things differently from those adorned with gold and silver vestments and staffs who tended to forget they were accepted by the state and protected by the people’s taxes.”

She was clearly hinting at someone unrelated to this. And he could not take that at face value. There was an obvious note of jealousy in the Black Cat Witch's voice.

"I do not regret the days of begging my friend Annie for living expenses. And I certainly have no hard feelings for my husband who never held down a worldly job as he dedicated himself to magical research that could not buy even a single loaf of bread. Yes, we were all magicians, so of course our top priority was making progress toward our great goal."

Kamijou felt like reading too deeply into this would only reveal a tragic story. He sensed the same atmosphere as if a group of manga artists had rented an apartment together only to find out none of them were making any money.

The rundown room had no charm outside the flow of time and a conversation was underway with no concern for Kamijou and the Black Cat Witch.

A middle-aged man spoke to an elderly man in an aloof tone.

"Westcott, all things are connected. You cannot escape the influence things have on each other."

"What is this, Mathers? That sounds like something Frazer would say. He must have wanted public acceptance and…well, I'll admit that tasteless Golden Bough is as simple as a hot dog smothered in mustard. It's like Italian pizza. The simple flavor draws in the masses and the toxin of the letterpress copies gathers charisma around him without anyone noticing."

"That's enough of that, gloomy old man. Don't get so upset just because someone's having fun with Hermeticism. If you're jealous that his name is going down in history, then grab a knife and head outside. Just like a certain Jack of ill repute. But, but. If you have any intelligence whatsoever, then let's begin an experiment here."

"What kind of experiment?"

"I'm sick of cards. We all know each other's tells too well. Today, it's chess. How about I use this to prove the existence of that influence I was talking about."

"It's always about gambling with you! If you're broke, how about being honest and bowing down to me?"

"This is a worry a Scotland Yard coroner could never understand. Not when you're paid with public money and head straight to the pub to spend it all. You really are

quite the magician. I mean, you've brought alchemy back at the end of the 19th century!"

"Yes, but I was nearly sacked when it was found out I attend these suspicious meetings! The higher ups have their eye on me, so it's always a gamble showing up even to this unofficial temple."

…It was a fairly awful conversation for two grown men. Kamijou could see what Mina had meant about men remaining childish no matter how old they were. He was reminded of the fact that the magicians like Stiyl and Kanzaki had all been the type to insist on doing things their own way even if that meant defying the ways of the world, but if they took that far enough, would they end up like this?

However, when he looked around again, he felt like he could see a few things that lined up with what Mrs. Mathers had said.

Then the Black Cat Witch spoke up again.

"By the way, the older old man is Westcott and the other old man is Mathers… making him the husband that gave me the 'Mrs.' "

"Then don't call him an old man. Show some love!"

"This is based on yours and Crowley's points of view."

Kamijou had no idea what was normal or what fashions were in style during the late 19th century and early 20th century, but he saw a major difference here.

The elderly man named Westcott wore a tailored suit with a necktie and Mathers wore a military uniform with a thick cloak and a worn-out pointed hat. However, the uniform was not modern camouflage. It was an extremely colorful outfit that would look more at home on a windup soldier doll.

"…Your husband had some…interesting tastes."

"The mess of colors is really an eyesore to look at."

"Again, show some love as his wife!!"

Anyway, this was the beginning of the Golden cabal.

It was not an underground group with high-level organization. Nor did it seem like a secret church that followed some complex and mysterious scriptures. It did not even look like a research institution for making world-changing inventions.

If anything, it was more like an unauthorized salon or an evening party where intelligent people of different occupations and backgrounds gathered to share their ideas. Instead of enjoying the evening by sharing stories of daring exploits, they would reveal the results of their research to each other.

The elderly man looked at the middle-aged man's hand and raised his voice in lamentation.

"Ahh!? What is this!? Who in their right mind would place their bishop there!?"

"Westcott, do you not remember what I said? You cannot escape the influence things have on each other. You may not see the path now, but this move will guide you to the game's rightful conclusion. Now, let the clock resume ticking."

"Did you think you could throw me off my game by making an unorthodox move?"

"If you still cannot see the path after all that, then I'm in luck. These nights of awful, sticky fog are the perfect time for some Irish or Scotch. I'm going to earn myself some decent money so I can enjoy this night."

"Only the unenlightened use alcohol to see visions, Mathers."

"Nonsense. I'm still a proper gentleman compared to those self-styled intellectuals that use the proud witch's rituals as an excuse for lots of sex and drugs."

"Bff!?" spat out Kamijou.

The cat-eared woman in mourning clothes shrugged next to him.

"Well, that's one of the reasons this age was fairly shameful for magicians."

"Isn't that an extremely worldly problem for you to be caught up in…?"

"At the time, the newspapers that were finally getting off the ground had no real journalistic spirit whatsoever. It was not long before then that public executions were held as entertainment for the masses while the infamous witch hunt swept across the world, but I think it was only the method of execution that had changed by this time. The people laboring to keep food on the table day in and day out would find a dark joy in the newspapers that provided a 'social death' to the wealthy and the intellectual who seemed to live in an entirely different world."

"Why would the newspapers want to cause chaos?"

“Once more time passed, the film industry was born and the people could let out that accumulated pus by watching the villains executed on the screen, but now that the internet has grown ubiquitous, it almost seems we are returning to the era of journalistic executions.”

…Did it really look like that if you only viewed one side of the issue? Kamijou felt like that would give you a pretty serious bias about it all.

“Ahh!? What is this!? When did the board get all locked up like this!?”

“Didn’t I tell you, old man? You cannot escape the influence things have on each other. Hah hah!!”

“Tch. I never thought I would be buying a man a drink at this age. By the way, Mathers, I heard about that newcomer. And with that, I have to ask: are you insane?”

“Is this really all it takes to shake you? You mean Crowley, don’t you?”

“?”

Kamijou’s heart leapt slightly at that.

But the magicians in the room smoothly continued.

“How can I not doubt your sanity in this one? He’s one of those who have remade the good, old rituals into sex and drugs, isn’t he?”

“That is certainly a rough spot, but in his case, it isn’t an excuse or a front. You can’t just laugh it off because he really is logically and efficiently achieving results with that. Merely looking at the surface without giving him a chance to explain is the same as announcing that your intellect is no greater than the self-styled intellectuals who shriek about everything they read in the newspaper, Westcott.”

“He will bring disaster to our Golden cabal.”

“Now are you jealous of Merlin, old man? Since when could you see visions of the future without using any tools? Anyway, I married a future painter and gathered the knowledge of many people, from scholars to artists, to accomplish this. So let’s try to show some results with our prototype GD tarot.”

“Gee dee?” parroted Kamijou with a tilt of his head, so the Black Cat Witch whispered sweetly back at him.

“There are many theories about the origin of that card set, but this was a

reinterpretation using the secrets of Kabbalah. It was an attempt to remove the original sin that people are born with."

"Oh."

"Well, it's a little jumbled up, but it was basically the Golden cabal's own version of the card set. They were the type that loved to get all worked up about praising their own work."

"If not for that last part, I might have just accepted it with a normal 'is that so'! Y'know, like when you're looking up at a temple or castle!!"

It may have been hard to tell how incredible an important person was when you had a good friend of theirs with you.

Meanwhile, the chess game was still underway.

"…I am a founder of the Golden cabal, you know?"

"As am I. Checkmate."

A dry clack rang through the room.

Kamijou had trouble picturing how chess pieces moved, but there was apparently nowhere else to move.

"Two founders of the same rank have fought a high-level spiritual battle and that magic duel has shown who is superior. Now, pay up. I need some drinks and snacks to show proper discretion concerning our new member."

"Was that what you were after this entire time?"

"Didn't I tell you, Westcott? You cannot escape the influence things have on each other. It was your inexperience that blinded you to the path. I've actually already called him to the door here."

"Without my permission…!?"

"I just got it now, old man. Come in, newcomer!!"

After a modest knock at the door, the knob slowly turned.

"…"

Had this truly decided it?

Kamijou did not know the details, but this felt to him like a major turning point in history.

And then the Black Cat Witch spoke.

“That man could be so full of himself when no one was watching. ‘I married a future painter to accomplish this’? Hmm, I see. More than a century has passed, but it really, really pisses me off to hear that again.”

“This world needs more love!!”

Part 5

The beginning was always signaled by falling, but the ending was always sudden.

“Uuh!? Gh… What? Am I back? Or have I made progress…?”

Kamijou groaned, placed a hand on his forehead, and shook his head.

(What are the problems I’m facing right now? Aleister, regrouping with Index and the others, and the shadow sword in Maika’s chest. Okay, good. My mind is still working properly!)

The inside of the Windowless Building was still a dreary empty world with an endless ceiling overhead and no sign of human life.

As he supported his unsteady body with the railing and continued on, the scene changed.

The stairway, escalator, and elevator from before were gone. Instead, he saw ladders directly embedded in the wall, catwalks, and silver ducts that twisted around like snakes.

The change from elevators and such supported from below to these things embedded in the wall changed the type of mountain climbing.

Did that mean he had reached a higher level?

Either way, he was risking his life even more. The odds of an accident on stairs were different from on a ladder. And this was quite high up for a building. He still

could not see the ceiling, but he could not see the bottom anymore either. It was all swallowed by darkness.

“Oh, ohh.”

“?”

Hearing a voice from somewhere, he frowned and looked up. A bit ahead of him, a girl in a maid uniform was clinging to a ladder and reaching her leg over to a catwalk. It was Tsuchimikado Maika. She was sticking her hips out at the exact same height as his face. And she of course still had the hardened shadow sword piercing her flat chest, so the mountain’s devilishness that bound people’s hearts (the handcuff ring and gear) were falling around her at irregular intervals.

But the unsteady footing was actually a good thing here. Most of the metal objects slipped away and fell into the dark depths below. Without coming to a stop, they could not gather the transparent body that was a lot like sugar water. They were completely useless here.

(Or does this work just as well for them?)

“Oh, if it isn’t Kamijou Touma. I was worried after getting separated from everyone.”

“Where are you trying to go?”

“I was hoping to find Aniki since he disappeared. I doubt he’d be defeated so easily, but if he isn’t here, I thought he might be higher up. Whoops-a-daisy.”

She made it sound cute, but she was actually flailing her leg after missing the rung on what was essentially a ladder attached to the wall of a building more than 100m tall. Kamijou quickly looked to the narrow footing along the wall, gasped because he carelessly looked down, and took a deep breath before pressing his back against the wall and sliding over toward Maika. The only upside was the lack of unexpected gusts of wind he would have had to worry about with a normal building.

Once he finally arrived near Maika, he pressed both his hands against the back of her hips through her chic maid uniform.

“C’mon, that’s dangerous, so hurry on up!”

“Hm?”

The maid trainee’s body jumped upwards slightly. Kamijou looked puzzled, so the

Black Cat Witch whispered softly into his ear.

“Hee hee. Taking advantage of the fact that her hands and feet are on the ladder to go for the defenseless butt of your friend’s sister, are we? You’re quite the piece of shit.”

“Why aren’t you worried about any of this!? I’m on the verge of falling too, so help out!!”

Kamijou shouted at the top of his lungs to avoid any unfortunate misunderstandings, but Maika only tilted her head with her hands and feet still on the ladder.

“Hm? Hmm? Hey, Kamijou, who are you talking to?”

“Eh?”

“It looked like you were yelling into empty space, but do you have a phone headset on or something?”

(Huh? Could it be…?)

Kamijou looked to the space next to him.

For some reason, Mina Mathers was standing on the dangerous footing while bashfully holding the long skirt of her mourning clothes with both hands.

“Flash, flash.”

“No, you aren’t bashful at all, are you!? Are you trying to distract me until I fall to my death!?”

“Hmm???”

No one could remain this confused while right next to someone who was basically committing public suicide by shame, so as Kamijou had suspected, Maika could not see Mina.

“People gather information on the outside world using their retinas and eardrums, but the accuracy is not always identical. For instance, myopia refers to a condition in which the eyeball itself extends elliptically towards the back. Since the red you see is not the same as the red Tsuchimikado Maika sees, it is not difficult at all to select an individual I wish to be seen by and display my form to them alone.”

“…Wow. That sounded sort of convincing, but that long explanation didn’t actually *explain* anything.”

“…”

Even through the veil, he could sense her sullen mood.

Oh? He may have hit a sore spot for her there. In that case, what could he do to improve her mood? If he knew how to reward her with a figurative treat and punish her with a figurative whip, he could construct a controller for dealing with this strange and annoying woman.

“Wicked thoughts will only get you cursed, boy.”

“Ahn?”

“For example, trying to force a lady in mourning clothes to obey you by hitting her with a whip. Perhaps I should make a quick post on a fancy SNS about a troublesome neighborhood boy.”

“I’m done asking how you can read my mind, but you read it wrong this time! Your data’s corrupted! Don’t make this worse by misreading my thoughts!”

“It is possible a young woman with too much time on her hands might find it cute, but the odds of that are about the same as hitting 00 in a game of roulette.”

“I said stooooop!!!!!! (…Ah. But won’t the odds be the same no matter which pocket it lands in? Could I really have a chance with a wealthy young woman who has too much time on her hands?)”

“Hello?”

Kamijou Touma had only been protecting himself, but Maika could not see Mina and only stared at him like he was a crazy person. He suppressed tears while wondering if there even was a right answer in this world.

“Aniki seems to be the kind of person who works extra hard and derives a sense of accomplishment from the exhaustion that brings. If he’s gotten into a weird penance mode, we need to find him and stop him as soon as possible.”

…So with or without the pair of karma beasts made from rainbow chains and transparent flesh and blood, they had to continue upwards. The gears and handcuff rings falling around Maika were probably forming their bodies once they reached the ground far below, so no one would want to head back down there if they could avoid it.

Mina Mathers gently bent her hips and stretched her head in from the side to speak with a thin smile behind her veil.

“By the way, that is a magic sword.”

“Well, yeah. It’s a sword made from magic. Anyone could tell you that!!”

“Not what I meant. It is not the wind dagger of the four great elements. I mean that it is the symbolic weapon meant to guide the summoning ceremony. It is primarily something like an amulet that drives out negative power and protects the spell user, but to ‘drive out’ also means to ‘divert or guide in a convenient direction’. So if used correctly, it can be used for summoning as well. Normally, you would take an appropriate sword, color the hilt green and the scabbard red, consecrate it by engraving a divine name into it, and carefully guard it so only the owner can touch it.”

“Sum…moning?”

That made a lot of sense here.

Maika had the strange short sword stabbed through her chest and those creepy handcuff ring and gears kept appearing around her.

“It’s actually so clichéd that the grimoire library may have misread it. I mean, who would think *the* Crowley would smugly use the most basic of techniques? …But in reality, the greater an expert masters their field, the more focus they place on the fundamentals.”

That aside, Kamijou had to wonder if Maika had any thoughts concerning the blade in her chest.

“And when it comes to mastery rather than combat, Crowley always sought virginity in his weapons. In other words, he refused to reuse something that was already used for another purpose. A hammer is needed to strike the sword, iron ore and wood are needed to make the hammer, and so on and so forth. In the end, you need 1000 or even 10,000 things to create a single weapon, but he would claim it was all a necessary part of the learning process. Yes, almost like they were all pieces of a puzzle.”

…Or was her carefree attitude the result of doing everything she could to avoid looking at an inconvenient truth? Like someone who felt sick but kept lying to themselves because they did not want to go to the hospital and hear they had come down with a strange illness.

Looking at it that way, Kamijou hesitated to ask her about it or joke about it.

She could come to her senses at any moment and enter an unmanageable panic.

And unlike normal, that would be deadly during this elevated mountain climb.

“The footing looks pretty unreliable up ahead, Kamijou Touma. Could you support me?”

“Sure thing. Dammit.”

He felt like he was choosing his path, but he was not.

No, perhaps it was more accurate to say every one of the million options available to him would lead to the same result. Fear snuck into his fingertips and spread to the rest of his body, but this was a different sort of fear from the hundreds of billions of hells Othinus had once shown him.

“This kind of reminds me of the second-story seats in the gym.”

“Ohh, now that you mention it.”

There was a narrow metal ladder and a narrow walkway with a metal lattice floor. If not a gym, it felt like the space for lighting equipment above a theatre stage. … The problem was its position unknown hundreds of meters above the ground and that a single stumble would mean instant death.

“With narrow footing, there’s a risk of falling, but with wide footing, the handcuffs and gears can create their bodies and attack. Honestly, neither option is great…”

“Sorry about getting you caught up in all this.”

This was nothing for Maika to apologize for. At any rate, she and Kamijou worked together to climb higher.

“W-will this really be okay? There isn’t some gathering point where the handcuffs and gears have been piling up, is there?”

Some of Maika’s fear must have been seeping out because she occasionally trembled, clenched her small hands, and moved her face close to his chest.

She was right on the borderline of being close enough to feel her body heat.

Then the cat-eared piece of shit whispered in his ear.

“Your friend’s sister.”

“(I know that, you moron!!)”

The pair of pursuing chain beasts was not his only concern. The ladders and catwalks were fine. There was a clear “path” made for people to travel along, even if it was narrow.

The problem was the silver ducts wriggling along the wall like snakes and the air conditioners sticking out like univalves on a rock wall.

“Eh? What, are we supposed to jump!?”

There was something wrong with the mountain climbing route. This was no longer a “path”.

They had to choose a step in the air to climb up and around on and then jump from one block to another. It felt like being forced to play a real-life version of a retro platforming game where falling meant instant death. At a meter off the ground, this might have qualified as a new form of athletics, but things changed at 500 meters off the ground.

His legs felt weak.

He could not draw out 100% of his usual strength.

There was no risk of a sudden gust of wind indoors, but he did not have it in him to count that as a positive at the moment.

For one thing, could the air conditioners even support their weight?

He was afraid the screws would break when he landed, sending him and the air conditioner plummeting to certain doom below.

Maika was of course hesitant to get started and she finally made a suggestion with her face entirely pale.

“W-wouldn’t it be a good idea to prepare some kind of lifeline before attempting this…?”

“Well, I would love to, but was there anything around here we could use as a rope?”

Tsuchimikado Maika responded to Kamijou’s question by reaching to her back with both hands. And he heard a rustling of cloth.

“Hwah!? What!? Why are you stripping!?”

He had no idea how a maid uniform was put together, but was she untying something behind her? Even in an emergency, he was not sure using the apron or dress as a rope was the best idea. Plus, this was an extremely delicate situation what with her being his friend’s sister, so wouldn’t that nyah-nyah sunglasses boy get super mad!? Kamijou Touma’s thoughts bounced around wildly like a game of squash or pinball, but Maika softly blew a heated breath from her nose.

And for some reason, she pulled a crowbar and roll of duct tape from her long skirt.

“Hold it right there, you freak of a maid.”

“Well, that’s just rude. Duct tape is sturdy, so pulling out long strips and layering it several times is enough to support someone’s body weight, you know?”

“That’s not the point. Think of the context here. How in the world did you suddenly pull a crowbar and duct tape out of your skirt!?”

“With these 2 things, you can solve most any trouble in a mansion.”

He had trouble thinking she meant fixing a leaky sink or hooking up a DVR. Did she want to be the kind of maid who could rescue the trapped daughter of the family by single-handedly taking on the group of terrorists that had hijacked a gorgeous mansion protected by a state-of-the-art security system?

“…Are you the kind of person who wants to combine a spray can with a lighter?”

“Yeah, yeah! Or turning the oven into an explosively formed penetrator.”

She was worse than he had imagined.

When he pretended to understand what she was talking about, she replied with some term he had never even heard before. Imagining how something that horrific-sounding had anything to do with a kitchen oven felt like traveling to another dimension.

“You can also tune up the lawnmower to make it go berserk or mix detergents to make poison gas. Nail guns are the standard in movies, but they aren’t actually that useful. So if you want a projectile, it’s best to combine a handy metal tube with the gas cylinder for a portable stove. And in addition to firing projectiles, that can be used as an acoustic weapon.”

“Dammit, is this what happens when you try to make a maid in Japan!?

Tsuchimikado, the maid spirit you're imagining has been corrupted beyond belief while you weren't paying attention!!"

When he analyzed the damage this had done to him, Kamijou realized that he had actually idealized maids more than he had thought. That pointy-haired boy felt like someone had dumped a bunch of sweet vinegar sauce on some delicious fried chicken. Of course, this did not mean that she had mastered all of that. It may have been nothing more than the maid school version of "what would you do if terrorists attacked during class". Or so he wanted to believe…

"A-anyway, the lifelines. Umm, we just have to get some long strips of duct tape and layer them a bunch of times, right?"

Even if the theory was correct, no one could stamp it with a safety guarantee. He wrapped it around his torso and then attached one end to a piece of metal sticking out from the wall…and as he repeated the process, he began sweating from tension all the more.

He tugged on the makeshift lifeline again and again to make sure it felt nice and sturdy.

And then the piece of metal it was attached to suddenly broke off.

"Bahh!?"

His body seemed to slip away and he was thrown out into empty air. The scenery melted around him. No, this was different. It was the falling sensation that guided him into one of those visions.

Part 6

"Are you using pigeon blood?" asked a frowning voice. "A dye that takes a life is against our ethics."

They were no longer inside the previous apartment. It looked like a dark underground space. The space itself was large, but with the stone walls surrounding it and the unreliable candlelight, it felt horribly oppressive.

A silver-haired young man was stirring up a porcelain pot filled with something sinister-smelling. And the previous skeptical voice belonged to…the elderly

Westcott. He looked ready to attend a social gathering in his suit, but that looked terribly out of place in this musty underground space. His social standing was clearly different from the others around him. If that eccentric conversation with middle-aged Mathers was accurate, he was apparently a coroner…meaning he worked for the police.

The young man did not look up as he poured all his focus into stirring the pot. He apparently had no intention of responding.

Westcott of the Three Founders grimaced even more, so Mathers, the man of identical rank who had apparently recruited the young man, smiled bitterly and responded.

“We do not wish to create a coded document that is damn near impossible to decipher and no one can read. We can leave that to the secretive Rosicrucians. Oh, or was that too bold a thing to say to an old man who likes to bring a rosy scent to the cabal and even brought in a mysterious secret document?”

“…”

“Do you know why the steam engine has spread so far across the world? The industrial revolution happened because anyone can use it and because it distributes its benefits equally. The sailing ships from the Age of Discovery look freeing enough at first glance, but they actually required national approval and protection to use. That is why the entirely privatized steamers so easily won out. Our Golden cabal will begin a new age in the same way. And what we need to do that is not the all-inclusive and ‘completed’ Christian bible. With that, you take the fixed miracles left behind by a ‘great being’ and branch out via differences in interpretation, so the possibilities are limited. What we need is a way of arranging basic incantations and symbols to materialize any idea you have in whatever form you desire. We need a *work kit* similar to a board game that extends the possibilities endlessly.”

“…”

“In that case, what is the Golden cabal’s greatest foe? Wouldn’t it be the avoidant reaction that hides everything behind the veil of the mystical, insists that the red on the palette means blood and the black means darkness, and continues to remove budding possibilities in that way, Westcott? And yet all of the colors are needed to paint the life force of a bright and beautiful flower. They are intentionally exaggerating the danger of the original grimoires’ toxins, but it is perfectly safe if you avoid jumping right into a theory that is entirely separated from the current world and instead gradually accustom yourself to the knowledge in stages using the *work kit* method that slowly deepens understanding one piece

at a time. If people assumed the sky was inviolable, the airplane never would have been invented and the progress those inventor brothers are making toward an individual machine would have been delayed by a century."

"…"

"Besides, we are in no position to talk about the ideal. From master to apprentice, master to apprentice, master to apprentice. …How many barriers are there between those of us here and a newcomer that joined today? The more people in the cabal, the more people placed in the higher ranks by the ritual of advancement, so those of us at the top are saying 7=4 on paper and peeling back the mask reveals something truly bizarre beneath. It isn't right. And if the outer face and inner truth don't match up, the entire organization's image grows indistinct. Passing things from master to apprentice is fine, but a problem occurs when you don't know which master to ask about what. If a unique method of determining which of the leaders is actually useful becomes necessary, it's no different from seeking worldly wisdom in prison. The quality of the people drops when they have to spend their time on that."

"…"

"A cabal is an organization. If the bottom collapses, the top goes with it. We need to take action before this decrease in quality comes to a head. It's nonsense for the leaders to arrogantly assume the failure to communicate is a lack of talent on the other end and thus give up trying. The necessary knowledge must be right in front their eyes from the moment they enter the cabal. We need to return to the basic idea of providing what is necessary and only what is necessary. We are not seeking a great quantity of knowledge. We are seeking a way to use it! It can be a crystal ball, cards, a turtle shell, or crackling flames. All those who received the benefits of magic had tools to show them the way. Isn't that also what we want? The completion of a collective device that will answer any anonymous question from someone with the proper experimental environment, be they master or apprentice? Listen, old man, only you enjoy your backwards teaching methods. I want an easier way! And for that, we must immediately complete a *work kit* that will naturally answer a seeker's questions as they play with and learn from it."

It was truly a deluge of words, but one term stood out to Kamijou.

"Work…kit?"

The Black Cat Witch responded by tapping her finger on the table in a corner of the ceremonial ground.

There was…something there. It looked like a detailed miniature garden or a

complex foreign board game. There were wands and disks carved from wood, cups made by melting glass, and similar daggers made from metal. They looked like toys at first glance, but a lot of work had clearly gone into making them.

And Kamijou noticed something else.

It looked familiar. It was like a miniature version of the room in which they stood.

“To use modern terms, the concept is probably similar to an app development tool,” explained the woman. “I mean, Hermeticism says everything in the world is made from 22 letters. From there, everyone just has to instinctually rearrange the graphical elements to prepare the environment. That is the gist of ceremonial magic that uses the form of a theatrical play and the miniature garden is a playwriting device for individual use. If the conditions had been different, it might have taken a form similar to haiku or tanka. Instead of relying on god and waiting your turn, this supplies the means of causing the miracle you feel is necessary. Or that’s the naïve ideal form, anyway.”

You moved the dolls within the miniature garden, had them hold the items like the daggers or wands, sprinkled colorful flower petals or leaves from a bottle, and made your own incantation by rearranging the terms in the guidebook.

And that created magic.

Anyone could try it as simply as making a bead accessory.

…Depending how you viewed it, that way of thinking could seem irreverent and frightening. Academy City’s esper development, for example, did not allow you to choose your power type or level, but if the magic side had been able to freely choose everything as easily as selecting toppings for a crepe, how twisted would it have grown?

Even if this app development tool was used to create a virus or phishing site and caused great damage in the outside world, the Golden cabal would not care. Did they see it like a gun culture where the ubiquity of weapons grew due to mutual distrust and a desire for self-defense? Did they see it as an age where those without a weapon would die?

“I am not saying we need to put a stop to this,” said Westcott. “I am saying even magic cabals need compromise. If we grow truly indiscriminate, we will be seen as no different from those wild partying groups.”

“This is worth the risk. Begin, Crowley. Open the eyes of this old man who is quickly falling into skepticism!”

Despite the over-the-top encouragement, the young man called Crowley made no grand actions like a stage magician. In fact, he did not even draw a magic circle directly on the floor. He placed a cloth over the round table in the corner and began drawing a large circle on it using the table's outer edge.

"That is heresy!!" bellowed Westcott.

"Don't be silly. It's actually perfectly logical. As I said, our goal is not a 'completed' bible that follows the footsteps of a 'great being' and thus only has a limited number of miracles. We will create a *work kit* with endless possibilities that will bring back the communication of knowledge that has begun to slow to a trickle within our Golden cabal. We created a free cabal that allowed anyone in, man or woman, so it makes no sense to make them wait in meaningless lines. And due to the excessive number of people in the higher ranks, there is no guarantee that the person at the end of the line will provide the correct answer. We should be celebrating when people cut in line and when there is conflict between master and apprentice. What could be better than receiving feedback through confrontation? …This will be as close by as a lady's sewing set or knitting needle and as professional as a painter or sculptor's tools. Westcott, you had good taste to use the Germans as reference when establishing this cabal. After all, they have some truly involved board games."

The small box contained the toys such as the cups and wands. A row of small bottles had varieties of dried flower petals and leaves sealed inside.

It was extremely detailed, but it would hint at new possibilities to newcomers, just like a child first touching an electronic circuit board bought as a teaching tool.

There was no good or evil there.

A child's basic set could be used to create a radio or an eavesdropping device. In an old war, the soldiers had been issued the same paint sets used by children, which they used to disguise bombs as bricks or coal, laying traps that harmed military and civilians alike.

This was the same.

Even if paint was used in war, the paint's developers were not criticized.

That was the way they saw this.

"Hey, Westcott, how many years did it take before you could accurately draw a 2m circle freehand? And not while standing in front of a canvas, but while stooped over staring at the floor?"

"…"

"This youngster is saying this one idea can erase all the wasted effort we all went through. Drawing directly on the floor will soon seem ridiculous. He says we just have to use the circle of a round table for guidance and then lay the tablecloth on the floor. This is what it means to have a *work kit* made just like a detailed board game. We can sweep aside the lines that might lead nowhere and instead use a collective device that accepts questions from anyone and gives effective answers to those questions. This is the dawning of an age in which everyone who seeks direct answers to their questions and aspires to use magic can freely give form to any idea they think up."

The concept of programming languages did not yet exist in this age.

These people were only looking at a complex analog board game.

But to Kamijou's eyes, this looked like the engineers who had only ever typed in complex and obscure C code dreaming of an app development tool that would allow even children to link together pieces as if assembling a jigsaw puzzle.

It was innocent, but dangerous.

These were truly infinite possibilities that could lead to both good and evil.

"Listen, old man. When guns showed up, the proud knights balked and said that was not tradition. When the steam engine showed up, the weaver women wailed and said the inferior mass-produced products had no soul. …But who can hear their voices now as we experience the stormy waves of time?"

"Are you saying I am a dying breed?"

"Old man, you aren't extinct yet. Humans still win out over the steam engine because we can retrace our steps without someone pulling a giant lever. Do you still not get it? *Now* is the time to reconsider your thinking."

Westcott let out a snort.

He had no intention of hiding his dislike with this newcomer's character. He was likely prepared to throw the young man out if he made even a single mistake.

But even the awfully tense atmosphere that ruled the room did not impede the silver-haired young man's movements. He prepared some kind of ritual with the precision of a clockwork doll. He confirmed the accurate directions, lined the pieces up at the appropriate locations, measured the precise time to get each movement just right, used the exact right pronunciation to send vibrations from

his body to the air, and moved around the ceremonial ground with the perfect movements.

Kamijou knew little about magic, but even he could tell.

It was all going exactly as Westcott wanted.

But that seemed to make the old magic user's eyebrows twitch irregularly. He must have truly despised the expressionless young man who worked calmly as if the great pressure did not bother him in the slightest.

The old man wanted to criticize him but could find no grounds for doing so.

The look on Westcott's face made that perfectly clear and a mischievous smile came to Mathers' face when he saw it.

"It's no use, Westcott," said Mathers as if he could not hold back any longer. "Magicians are not the type of person who will be accepted by the masses. And yet we continue to leave our mark on history. This is a path we all travel down, is it not? Westcott, your behavior actually proves that that young Aleister Crowley here is walking down the Golden path just like we once did."

"Are you suggesting someone who showed no sign of understanding the arrangement of our GD tarot can skip straight past visions and accomplish a summoning using a Telesma-level ceremony? Mathers, if we want to avoid losing this promising young man, we should put a stop to this ceremony right this instant. Or barring that, we should at least prepare an exorcising sword in preparation for when he inevitably loses control of the dark forces."

"Oh, don't be so sure. If he was someone of such common talents, do you think an eccentric on my level would fall for him and work to win him over to my side?"

The conversation came to a stop.

That was due to the explosion-like roar that came from the floor.

It was invisible, but something like a powerful mass of wind raged around them.

Westcott was of course the one whose eyes widened.

"You fool!! I told you he would lose control of the dark forces!"

Westcott quickly pulled away the tablecloth that bore the magic circle drawn in pigeon's blood, but the same pattern had been scorched onto the ceremonial ground's floor. It was inorganic, but it had such persistence. It was like something

invisible had stuck its hand through the gap of a partially opened door and was trying to force it the rest of the way open.

“Help me with this, Mathers. We need to buy enough time to contact *Blythe Road* and have them bring over the treasure!!”

“No, not yet!! Ha ha!! This is where things get interesting!!”

Mathers spread his arms wide as if to welcome it.

Then something changed.

The wind did not calm down, but it gained clear directionality. It wrapped around in a fierce whirlwind as if to contain itself within the magic circle scorched onto the floor. Thanks to that, it maintained the intensity of its power, but it was compact and stable. A formless being was held within the circle and trapped like a fairy tale demon. The stage was set and it would have to answer any of the magic user’s commands.

It was like a gas light that could only burn within its glass container and would be snuffed out at the turn of the knob.

“What…? What happened!? He had clearly lost control!!”

“You’re looking at this in the old way, Westcott. You seem to view the world as 10 spheres plus the invisible Da’at connected by 22 lines, but that Sephiroth is but one side of the world. Aleister Crowley here has recalculated the world using the completely opposite tree.”

“The Qliphoth…? You mean the upside-down tree with a demon’s name engraved in each imaginary Sephirah!?”

“With enough knowledge and consideration, negative power can be changed into words with which to describe the world. What you saw as a failure was the starting point of success for this youngster. You can search for the stairway up to heaven if you like, but you can also learn the formula by investigating the hole down to hell. Just as reading Dante’s Divine Comedy as a bedtime story will make the children tremble in fear. *You just have to put in the effort to not turn out the same yourself.*”

“But this…this is too risky. I get that the reverse of the reverse is the front, but rushing into practical usage without understanding the truth of the words will only lead to summoning more and more dark forces until you have destroyed yourself. You say you want to create a magic *work kit* that guides you to the

miracle you want by lining up the symbols without any technical knowledge, to safely and surely raise up the newcomers with something akin to a detailed board game, and to complete a collective device that will answer questions from master and apprentice alike, but this goes against that entire philosophy! Just as the bible uses complex expressions to obscure the true meaning within, including the evil tree in our Golden cabal will only complicate our essence! If you want secret rituals full of the evil toxins of original grimoires that only a chosen few can understand and bare their fangs against any who make a mistake, then go join the Rosicrucians. I thought you said this isn't what we want!"

"Don't be so sure. It's all about reversing how you think. Just like how -1 times -1 is +1. Understand that and you won't be so confused. Whether you start from the positive or the negative, you can turn it in the positive direction in the end."

"I already said that mental exercise isn't suited for beginners! This is the capital of the proud British Empire, but the people of London still count coins with their fingers to calculate change. The swords and discs appearing and disappearing in that box is enough to confuse them. Listen, this is the state of things in London, the most advanced city in the world. Everyone begins as an amateur. You can't assume the masses can do the same things we can!!"

"That's why we're changing everything starting from there. Our board game of a *work kit* will change the world just as much as the steam engine did."

…

Kamijou had a sudden thought as he viewed this illusion conversation.

"Why aren't they able to just listen to each other…?"

Mathers was clearly provoking the other man to draw out what he really thought, Crowley was calmly continuing his experiment with no concern for the surrounding voices, and Westcott (while he seemed the most reasonable) was only advocating the traditions built up over time from the old principles in order to crush the results of this newcomer he did not like. If they had worked together toward a single result for just a little bit, couldn't they have reduced the necessary time considerably?

It felt like watching people endlessly arguing over the strongest animal with no hope of reaching an answer.

Then the Black Cat Witch sighed from where she had appeared next to him.

"When adults who can never forget their childish side get serious, they return to

being children. I generally had to settle things when this happened."

"…Oh, my."

That was all he could say.

A mediator for fruitless debate. A coordinator. Some people were forced into that endlessly exhausting job and Mina Mathers may have been one such person.

"So why did you even marry that guy?"

"Looking back on it, it seems the rough sort of man has an odd charisma to him. Are you familiar with the aesthetics of a sharp tongue?"

"…"

"You sometimes hear about mysterious communities in which 10 or 20 women gather around a single man in a single apartment, right? …The Golden cabal was full of ridiculously idiosyncratic people, but it was also a gathering of that sort of charismatic eccentric."

"Where's the love…?"

That would be why they could not agree no matter what they said. They all saw themselves as the "center". It was said too many captains would steer the ship up a mountain, but the Golden cabal may have been a ship steered so far off course with such great intensity that it crashed into a mountain on Mars.

Feeling dejected, Kamijou saw the illusions continuing their fierce argument.

"But now that we've proven Mr. Crowley's theory to be correct, we might need to review each of our documents one at a time."

"What are you saying, Mathers?"

"The GD tarot. Our Golden cabal completed that arrangement as a group, but Crowley has successfully summoned Telesma while rejecting the arrangement of those 22 cards. So perhaps the truth is contained in the *mistaken arrangement* he advocates. I am saying we need to look back over Waite's traditions."

"Is that what you were after!? You wanted to stick a scalpel in the Golden cabal's great achievement and deteriorate it just to increase your own influence!?"

"You are looking at this on too small a scale."

Kamijou Touma did not really understand magic.

Smashing something with a hammer to break it did not mean you knew how to build up precision equipment piece by piece. No amount of contact with magicians would turn him into an engineer.

But that pointy-haired boy sensed something like a slight shift to the atmosphere.

“What?” he asked. “Are they fighting over power within the group?”

“The Golden cabal was created by the Three Founders. But one of those retired due to old age, so the management became a tug-of-war between Westcott and Mathers. It was Crowley’s entrance that sent the power balance back to an odd number instead of an even one. If Crowley’s power had continued to grow, Westcott would likely have been eliminated two-to-one.”

“…”

“The Golden cabal worked to discover a unified theory to explain the truth of the world and they sought to construct a *work kit* that brought endless possibilities, unlike the bible that had a limited number of miracles left behind by a ‘great being’. Instead of using grimoires which are oceans of dangerous words, they would create an artery of familiar knowledge from fellow humans living in the same age. It would be as close by as a lady’s sewing set or knitting needle and as professional as a painter or sculptor’s tools. Instead of destroying your mind by taking in all of an original grimoire’s toxic knowledge at once, you would gradually come to understand magic in your own words by referencing a detailed board game simple enough for children or adults to play. Yes, just like a development tool that allows you to assemble an app by combining puzzle pieces on the screen instead of spending the time to learn the confusing C language.”

The Black Cat Witch explained the beginning of their ruin in a clear voice.

“By the way, Mathers was trying to investigate each of the pieces carved out by Westcott and the others so that he could use Crowley to rewrite them. By overwriting the *work kit development tool* they had all created, he could fill it with his and Crowley’s props. No, Crowley was an apprentice that Mathers looked after personally. So even if they worked together, the end result would be seen as a Mathers product.”

“Why go to all that trouble…?”

“He had no real reason. If I had to give one, I would say it was his greed and the fact that he was an eccentric with that sort of charisma. He wanted to break open

the stagnation of passing knowledge from master to apprentice and he wanted to clear way the prison-like learning system that required determining who from the many leaders was actually useful. He wanted to get rid of the long lines leading to who-knows-where and he wanted to create a collective device that allowed master or apprentice to ask anonymous questions without shame. And he wanted that simple but detailed *work kit* to have been proposed by him alone, not the entire group of Golden leaders. He wanted to leave his mark on history. That was probably all it was. Deep down, it was the same as the innocent dream of discovering a dinosaur fossil and having it bear your name forevermore. He too was an adult who could not rid himself of his childish side."

A dinosaur fossil made sense.

Kamijou could understand betting everything on spending days on end digging through the rocks.

…But once you did find a new kind of dinosaur fossil, could you really just turn around and drive out everyone who helped you in the dig just because you wanted to give it your name?

But then the Black Cat Witch said something odd.

"But that is not what actually happened."

"…? What???"

"Most of the modern magic *that ended up continuing on to the modern era* is judged to be a product of Aleister Crowley. Mathers' name is not found there. His innocent but wicked desire was snuffed out before it could be achieved."

That had not been done by Westcott or the other outsiders. Crowley was part of Mathers' faction after all.

Which meant…

"This is confusing," said Kamijou. "So Westcott and Mathers were opposed to each other, but then Mathers and Crowley were fighting within Mathers' own faction?"

"Directly, yes. Although the enemy reflected in Aleister Crowley's eyes was *something much larger*."

"?"

"Now, there was a certain incident that brought an end to Mathers' work when it

all seemed to be going quite well. His fall began with a quiet little armed conflict. What do you think that was?"

Asking questions he had no way of answering may have been a bad habit of Mina Mathers, the lonely woman who loved explaining things.

The cat-eared woman in mourning clothes provided the answer with a smile that seemed to hide deeper meaning.

"The Battle of Blythe Road that I mentioned at the beginning."

Part 7

Mikoto felt some kind of sharp pain run through her temples as she focused on what the A.A.A. was picking up.

"…Kh!!"

She grimaced, but something like quiet static continued to intermittently play from the small speaker (which she had acquired by sending Shokuhou's cellphone to its grave). Like reading a barcode, it was converted into a few human words as it slipped into Mikoto's ears.

There was no context.

There was no advance warning.

There was no kindness.

There was no asking if the listener understood.

The intermittent array of words felt like peering into someone's mind. There was no need to arrange it so someone else could understand and they already understood all the advance information needed to comprehend it, so it was like a rough and random riot of words. There was no structure or grammar, only an exchange of isolated terms emphasized in accordance to their importance, so it felt like peering at the notebook of an obsessive memo-taker and trying to use all the words crammed on the page to reconstruct what they had been thinking at the time.

Shokuhou Misaki specialized in reading people's minds, so was she always facing this wild vortex of information? Or was what Mikoto was viewing a highly unusual case?

She pushed back the pain scorching her brain cells and forcibly worked at converting it into understandable language.

She felt like she was on the verge of seeing something.

…Who was on the other end of the A.A.A.?

…Who was this grand pile of scraps connected to!?

"…?"

A sweet honey scent gently enveloped her face.

She focused on the outside world once more and found Shokuhou Misaki pressing a handkerchief to her face as if wiping a small child's nose.

"You have a nosebleed."

"Really?"

"There are legends saying expert chess or shogi players will get a nosebleed if they go too far with their concentration ability, so maybe this is something similar."

"Nn."

"Oh, dear. Are words out of style now?"

As Mikoto let the other girl treat her like a child, her focus slipped and she was trapped by the feeling that the fish she had nearly caught was escaping.

Even so, she felt like something was talking in a vague form as she linked together the fragmentary terms. Misaka Mikoto felt a vague anxiety that accepting this would cause everything she had built up to come crashing down, but for some reason, a very familiar phrase appeared there and would not go away.

To ensure the entire stone wall did not collapse, she slowly and carefully pulled out just one of the stones.

And she gently placed it on her tongue.

"…Kamijou Touma."

"?"

Shokuhou Misaki's slender shoulders definitely jumped.

"He really is a part of all this. But it's written differently…? Would that spelling mean…the One who Purifies God and Slays Demons…???"

Part 8

The vision vanished like fog.

Unpleasant sweat poured from Kamijou's entire body. The metal sticking out from the wall had not broken and the multilayer duct tape lifeline had not snapped. He had not been thrown out into the emptiness. …By this time, he had mostly figured out how it worked, but the sensation of falling still felt incredibly real. His heart was palpitating almost painfully in his chest. The term "taking years off your life" stabbed into his mind, but not as a mere figure of speech.

"Oh, ohh? Kamijou Touma, are you okay?"

"Yeah… But really, what *is* this???"

Was it a method of showing a target individual a premade vision? No, he felt like that was not enough to explain this.

More importantly, he wanted to know why *he* was being shown the visions. That bothered him more. After all, this was the Windowless Building. Everything here would come from Aleister. Even if the "device" named Mina Mathers was defying her master in contacting Kamijou, he had been shown many times now that the "human" named Aleister Crowley viewed both success and failure as a means to reach the desired result. So it was possible that *Mina's betrayal was part of the plan.* It was also possible that *questioning this was part of the plan.* It was also possible that *Kamijou believing he had seen through the plan was part of the plan.* …To be honest, once he sent his thoughts down that path, there was no end to it. That labyrinth of opposing mirrors or nesting dolls was the true essence of Aleister. And the moment you ran out of patience with that, it would mess with your defense calculations and allow his surefire attack to secretly strike.

Kamijou had to maintain his self.

He could not stop investigating deeper, but he also had to stop himself from restricting his own actions through excessive suspicion. He needed the accuracy of a clock's hands.

Even if thinking that way was part of the plan, he could not let his guard down at any of the countless hairpin turns. If just once he ran off the course and broke through the guardrail, he would roll right off the cliff, and that would end the same no matter which level he was on.

"…Whatever the case, we need to get past this."

"Y-yeah, that's right."

The mountain climbing no longer had stairs or ladders. They were combating a cliff face.

The wall they were using for footing only had silver ducts and air conditioners which were directly attached. In some places, the footing would branch apart in a position where they clearly could not stand. It was a lot like a retro platforming game where falling meant instant death, but this was nothing that cool. They would dangle down above the void using their lifeline, reach their toes over to the next footing while stretching their leg so far they were sure they would get a cramp, and then slowly shift their body weight over.

It looked silly, but they were several hundred meters up. Kamijou could not have felt more isolated when he had his feet on one of the boxy air conditioners.

The carefree maid girl must have had it even worse. He reached out his hands to help her as they worked together to move from air conditioner to air conditioner.

Once they finally reached the larger footing of a window cleaning gondola, they decided to take a quick break, but they found someone already there.

"Fran…?"

"Oh, were you down below?"

She too had apparently been moving upwards to regroup with the others. She must have continued up before Kamijou and Maika woke up.

But Fran would not have had a duct tape lifeline.

How had she overcome that retro platforming game of ducts and air

conditioners? Surely she had not actually nimbly hopped across.

His question was answered from an unexpected place.

“I thought this might happen, so I was carrying a spare balloon folded up with the floating gas removed.”

“You awful cheater!!!!!!”

He should have thrown his hands in the air and celebrated that an ally had found a safe way of traveling here, but he could not help but prioritize his complaints after seriously risking his life without that method. He wanted to unfairly ask why she had not brought them along too.

“Ahn? So can we just ignore the terrain for the rest of the way?”

Kamijou sighed on the dangling window cleaning gondola, but when he thought about it rationally, he realized he could not relax at all. There was no longer anything sticking out from the wall. He only saw the window cleaning gondola, a ropeway, a crane hook hanging from a wire, etc. From here on out, their footing would wobble unreliably as it dangled down from the darkness overhead. Instead of anything solidly anchored to the wall, most of it was wobbling back and forth like a pendulum. No amount of lives would be enough when trying something like that. Had Index and Tsuchimikado really made it through that to continue on up? What had happened to the calico cat or 15cm Othinus? Those fundamental questions passed through his mind.

Then he heard a comment from the girl who wore not just shorts but a hoodie bikini in winter.

“Well, um, as you can see from the volume of the floating gas and balloon, it has a weight limit. There’s no way it can carry 3 people…”

Kamijou Touma and Tsuchimikado Maika did not hesitate.

“Ah, wait! Just because it can only carry 2 is no reason to kick out the balloon’s owner! Isn’t that taking your cruelty too far!?”

“Shut up! I refuse to let you just take the easy road all the way the top! Stay here a bit!! Two heads are better than one, and three are even better than that, Fran-san!!”

“You two can fight on your own,” said Maika. “While you do, I’ll be taking this balloon up to the top.”

And in her mourning clothes and cat ears, Mina Mathers placed a hand on her chin while floating nearby like a ghost.

“If you don’t do something, I get the feeling all 3 of you will slowly fall to the bottom.”

“!?”

Kamijou had faced a great many things in this light bit of mountain climbing. While he certainly did not want to plummet down to his death, slowly descending to the bottom and having to do it all over again would absolutely kill his motivation.

So wise Kamijou Touma made a neutral suggestion.

“W-wait just a moment! It’s wrong to have us all fall. Fran, get us close to some kind of footing. We need to cool our heads for a bit!!”

But the blood had rushed to the hoodie bikini girl’s head, so she erupted.

“You don’t get to play the pacifist after grabbing on like this!! You started this yourself and now you’re ending it yourself? Do you think it’s all about you or something!?”

“Ah.”

A fairly serious kick was thrown at point-blank range and Kamijou’s body forgot all about gravity. But they were already several hundred meters from the ground. A somewhat intense *tsukkomi* could be deadly on this mountain climbing path.

(Oh, please no!! Am I just not suited for high places or something!?)

Plus, this was the boy whose fortune would come back with “terrible luck” in every category from romantic luck to business luck. However, he could not afford to kick the bucket here, so he flailed his arms around mostly on instinct.

And his desperately outstretched right hand felt something.

It was Fran’s bikini bottom.

He had grabbed on from the front.

“Hyahhh!?”

The rabbit-ear antennae girl held the balloon’s grip wire between her thighs, used

her hands to hold either side of the bikini bottom as it threatened to slip down, and began a hellish came of tug-of-war as she blushed red and shouted at him. Would it slip down or not? An extreme battle began.

“I’ll kill you, you pervert!!”

“Shut up, you attempted *tsukkomi* murderer!! And if you don’t want to lose the ‘attempted’ part, then help me out here. By the way, I’m truly thankful that your bikini isn’t the side-tie kind!!”

Then mourning clothes and cat ears Mina whispered in the life-risking boy’s ear as she floated casually alongside him.

“Despite how she looks, she’s actually very happy you’re giving her this attention. A bunny with a broken heart can die from loneliness after all.”

“Ohhh, is that so? Fran, are you just embarrassed? Then it seems to me you should be able to meet me halfway here.”

“…!!!!!!”

“The knee!? Gabh! A knee to my cheekbone!? Thanks for the really unreliable theory there, Mina. You’re not much help here either, are you!?”

“Don’t be silly. That is merely her way of hiding her embarrassment. She is what people call a tsundere.”

“Yeah, right. Inside and out, she’s seriously trying to kill me!!”

“Okay,” said Fran. “If you’re willing to have a nice chat with your own imagination there, please let go of my swimsuit.”

“I’m not risking my life here because I want your bikini, Fran! If you don’t let me clear up this misunderstanding, I’ll commit a double suicide with your bikini bottom here! I don’t think you’ll like the position that leaves you in!!”

He thought he had just barely managed to achieve equilibrium, but then he felt something slipping in his right hand.

(It can’t be! Did Fran really lose her final line of defense!?)

Kamijou was shocked by the pressure of falling, but that was not what had happened. His hand held nothing.

This sensation should have been impossible.

It was the same as the illusion of the railing or footing collapsing.

He was entering another vision.

Part 9

“This will probably be confusing, so allow me to make a note first: we will now move the timeline beyond the Golden age. Just keep in mind that this is past the time he spent with Mathers and Westcott.”

Every man and every woman is a star.

Separate from their surface consciousness, people contain a self that can achieve wisdom. If everyone could awaken to that self, the entire world would turn at maximum efficiency, as if all the gears fit together. In other words, nothing is intrinsically worthless.

“You look upset, young lady. Would it cheer you up if I invited you to the starry sky?”

In that case, there may have been some kind of necessity to the “human” known as Aleister Crowley meeting a certain woman.

His voice was similar to when he was younger, but it was also decisively different. It was calm, it contained an intent to connect with the outer world, and most importantly, it was not filled with hatred and doubt directed at the world.

He was considerate.

He was trying to gently touch the other person’s formless heart.

“…That’s surprising,” said Kamijou. “The magician of the century could fall in love like normal?”

“And I am the wife of eccentric Mathers,” said the Black Cat Witch. “Is that a problem?”

Did marriage really make someone look so much more reliable?

“Also, Crowley was surprisingly popular due to his androgynous beauty and his

eccentric charisma. In fact, because it came to him so easily, he never had much interest in normal love."

"Normies are the worst."

"Watch what you say. He was generally an unemployed eccentric who loved black jokes and submitted his own erotic novels to a cheap publisher, so you can't really call him a normie."

"Bff!?"

"In his great masterpiece, he got carried away and referred to male genitalia in more than 100 ways. He also visited Egypt and attempted the K2 with no extra oxygen supply. Once he started something, he would stubbornly give it his all."

Kamijou began trembling.

He felt his image of the evil demon king crumbling down around him. This was like looking under your father's bed or searching through your teacher's computer. There was some important information that an adolescent was better off not knowing.

"By the way, Crowley would also nonchalantly bring his own semen to the ceremonial ground where everyone was gathered and use it in experiments, he stole the butterfly decoration used to hide the crotch of a naked bronze statue and wore it over his pants to a party, and he would make the most wonderful rhyming sexual jokes whenever he saw a magician from the same cabal. He was quite the unrestrained magician."

"That just makes him a giant pervert!! His personality was entirely broken!!"

"At the time, it was all dismissed as mere mischief, so the difference between eras can be a frightening thing. I'm truly jealous of modern society with its civilized definition of sexual harassment…"

Whenever he looked more deeply into the older ages seen in samurai dramas or knight stories, Kamijou could not help but notice how difficult women had it, but if everyone around her had been *that* eccentric, Mina Mathers must have felt completely surrounded. And the sad part was that enduring it all would have been meaningless.

But Crowley the Unrestrained King had toned it down in the current scene.

Had the silver-haired young man seen enough value in the ephemeral woman standing next to him to suppress that egotistic side of himself? With the

perverted side of himself closed up like a cuckoo clock, the silver-haired “human” looked just like a gentleman with a strict policy of “ladies first”.

“That woman is named Rose. She became Aleister Crowley’s first wife.”

“First?”

“The details can come later. …Although after this, the things pent-up inside him exploded.”

“Now I don’t want to see the rest!! I have a bad feeling about what’s coming!!”

Time flowed by.

After marriage, they seemed to begin living together and Aleister apparently stopped trying to hide his magic research from his wife Rose. In fact, he actively used her as an assistant. Kamijou did not know exactly how it worked, but he seemed to sometimes use an incantation and a magic circle to summon something formless and send it *inside his wife’s body.*

The woman had initially seemed ephemeral, but Kamijou felt a heart-pounding unease when he saw her convulsing in a chair inside a basement filled with some kind of burning incense.

“Crowley was a man of logic and efficiency, so he did not hold back even with his own wife.”

“Huh?”

“That is a method of hypnotizing someone to intentionally guide them into a trance and access a higher being, but the trance here is the same type used by the ancient witches who would rub a special ointment on their brooms, mount them without wearing any underwear, and-…”

“Waaahh! Waaaaaaaahh!! Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!!!!”

Kamijou shuddered as his danger sense warned that carelessly listening any further would be like a scam where he was made to overhear told personal information and then pressured into paying money in apology.

“Now, as his true self exploded out and he ended up playing doctor – or rather, playing magician – with his newlywed wife, he eventually accessed a higher being said to be a guardian angel during a trip to Egypt. And that guardian angel’s name might have been glimpsed here in Academy City.”

"?"

"…That name is Aiwass. That being contains the number 93, just like Thelema. And just like Coronzon, that name became a major turning point in Aleister Crowley's life."

Kamijou did not recognize that name.

Although it was possible that it was a name someone other than him had pursued.

Answers did not always appear before the one seeking them.

"The compilation of Aleister's theories was turned into a book based on what Aiwass said through Rose's mouth. And this was something sensational enough to blow away not just the Golden cabal's foundational theories constructed by Westcott and the other leaders, but also the new theories Mathers planned to build by hijacking them."

"What? So he got an answer through something like the *Kokkuri-san*, decided he had drawn it from his own subconscious, and turned it into a book???"

"Sometimes a powerful grimoire is given more prestige through a legend saying it was provided by a higher being, but there are a relatively large number of records remaining of Crowley and Aiwass's contact. Although it seems the skeptics that wanted to get rid of him searched through and found fault with all of them. Still, I think it has more credibility than the laughable document permitting the cabal's establishment that Westcott forged."

"…Did you just casually slip in something really important there?"

"Legends are unnecessary if you only wish to learn knowledge and technique. But Westcott was from an older age, so he wanted his cabal to have history with an academic or royal scholar. Thus, he claimed to be the only person to have received permission to create a cabal from the ultimate higher being named Anna Sprengel. Whether or not Lady Sprengel actually existed, the document Westcott received was a fake created by an Englishman forging a German's handwriting. Honestly, if he hadn't been so intent on social standing, he wouldn't have fallen prey to those silly newspaper journalists later on."

Instead of a superhuman organization that secretly determined world events from the shadows of history…they felt more like a group of eccentrics that caused trouble wherever they went. If this was the gathering of geniuses that changed the magic side's level of techniques, Kamijou wondered if they had looked like an uncontrollable hurricane to those around them.

“But this would have been a happy time for Crowley.”

“…I’m really worried that his wife wouldn’t be able to survive that happiness.”

“Not what I meant.”

Time continued further.

And Kamijou heard a voice that seemed horribly out of place.

It was the crying of a baby.

“That is Aleister Crowley’s first daughter.”

“Oh… Yeah, I guess that would eventually happen if he got married.”

A small life was wrapped in a soft cloth.

The baby calmed down in her mother’s arms, but the man seemed to be keeping a slight distance. Was he afraid of infecting her with his impurity as a magician?

A high school boy like Kamijou had no way of knowing how much courage it would take to fill that slight gap.

But after a very, very long time, Crowley finally moved his fingertips toward his child’s mouth.

And then the small hand gently grasped the father’s fingers.

“To be blunt, her official name was about as overly-long as Jugemu Jugemu, but magic researchers simply call her Lilith. Crowley apparently read the stars to determine her name and it supposedly has an actual meaning. In other words, that was how obsessed with his daughter he was.”

“Ohh?”

His passion seemed to go to waste a lot, but it was kind of adorable when it went to waste for something like this. He sought logic and efficiency in everything and he would make harsh jokes and cruel jeers every time he opened his mouth, but perhaps he had worked hard to try his hand at something he was not used to.

As a father, he had wished for the happiness of his newborn daughter.

As he peered down at his daughter held gently in his wife’s arms, reached out his fingertips, and saw that tiny hand gently grab them, what had grown in the heart

of that “human” who had the skill needed to master magic and hijack the world’s greatest cabal?

“This was the happiest time for Aleister Crowley.”

“Yeah, maybe so.”

“Do you not understand? *This* was the happiest time.”

“…?”

Kamijou frowned when Mina Mathers insisted on repeating herself. He sensed some hidden meaning to her words.

And the Black Cat Witch explained while surrounded by an ominous atmosphere.

“To put it another way, it is only downhill from here. Aleister Crowley’s life only continued to sink without ever resurfacing.”

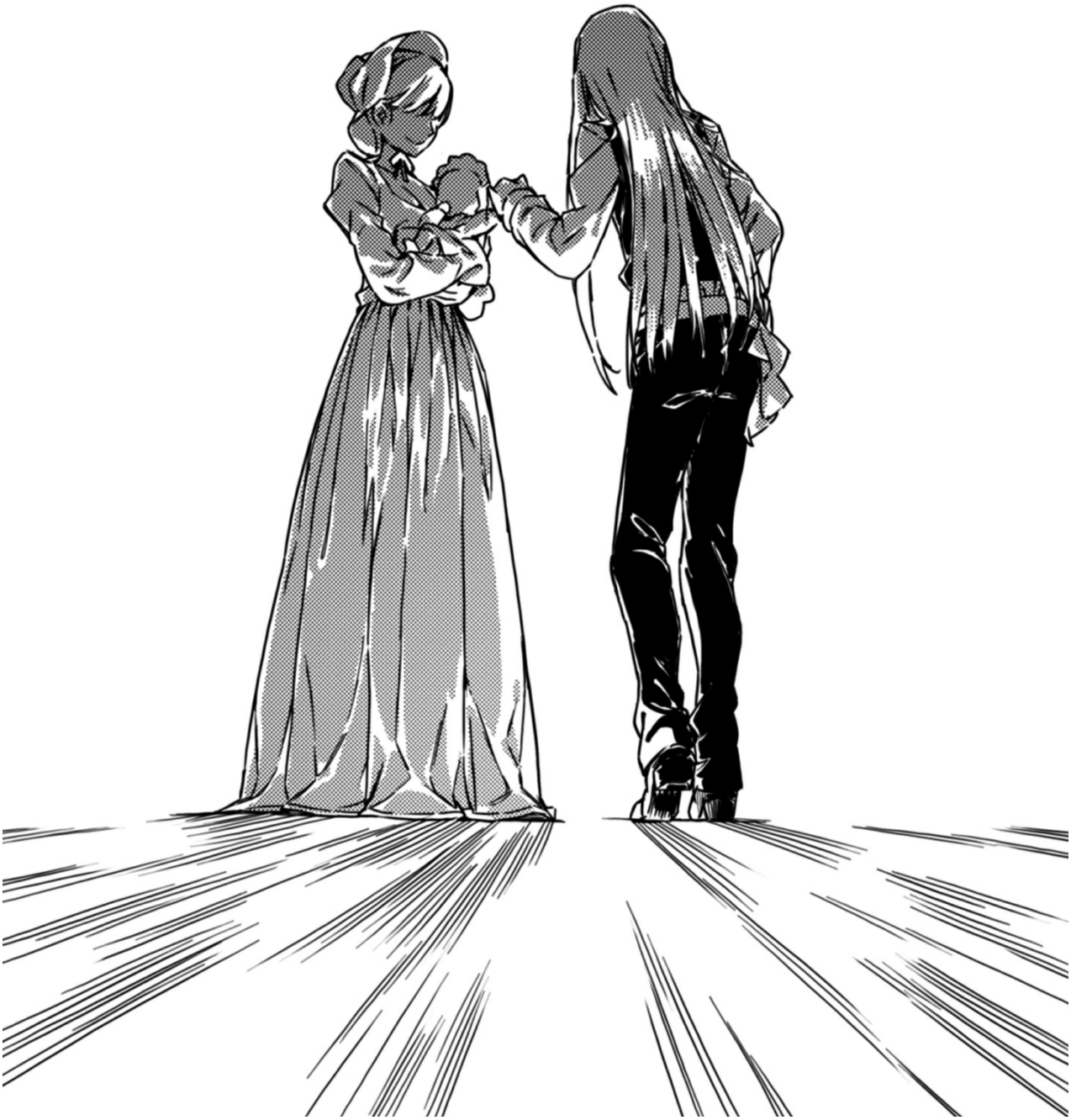
“Wait… Hold on…”

Kamijou looked back to the scene before his eyes.

This was an illusion.

Instead of complete fiction, it was probably an image of the past a certain person had walked. So no amount of struggling could change history. All of it had already happened.

But Kamijou still begged it to stop.



What he saw here was perfect. This was the ultimate accomplishment of

everything that Aleister Crowley was. What could be added to or subtracted from this? Any addition or subtraction would clearly be superfluous, but what had the outside world brought to this miniature garden?

“To assist with the birth and to protect the unstable mother and daughter with all his being, Aleister temporarily stopped his magical research. And to make up for that delay, he left on a trip to a great mountain once the mother and child’s state had stabilized. He had a certain objective there, but that does not matter here.”

There was a single answer.

“Once he was done there, he learned of his young daughter’s *unnaturally* sudden death by illness. That “human” had wished for his daughter’s happiness more than anyone else in the world and he had given her a name so long it was a pain to say…but he had not been allowed to come running and be with his beloved daughter as she died.”

That had begun the fall.

It had been a trigger great enough for a human to curse the destiny of the entire world.

Part 10

“Uuh…”

This was different from before.

He was not groaning from the shock and confusion of the scenery and vision suddenly changing. The information brought by the foggy city felt like a heavy blow to Kamijou Touma’s chest.

Aleister Crowley. The beginning of his fall.

The far too sudden loss of his young daughter, Lilith.

“…Dammit.”

Kamijou could not steady his wavering vision. As an average high school boy, Kamijou Touma had of course never had a daughter. He had no way of knowing

how realistic the feelings inside him were.

But the boy had no way of resisting the emotion driven inside him like a thick stake.

He curled up, opened his mouth wide, and let out a roar with all his might.

Emotions provided by an external source were never good. In a way, they were more dangerous than a flamethrower. He knew that, but he could not stop the clear liquid that spilled from his tear ducts.

This was what Kamijou felt while viewing it from a distance.

No, even as her actual father, Aleister Crowley had only been a distant observer. He had only learned of that small life's loss through a simple letter. He had not been allowed to rely on some grand magic produced from every technique he had and he had not even been able to hold that tiny hand, despite knowing it was no use. He only had the merciless result forced onto him after it was all over.

How could someone overcome something so unreasonable?

No, had he turned out the way he had *because* he could not overcome it?

Had the "human" named Aleister Crowley been wandering in a forest of his own creation for over a century?

And while Kamijou Touma's thoughts were in such a serious place, a girl's small foot struck his cheek.

"Get your hand off of my bikini bottom already, you pervert!!!!!!"

"Bghh!?"

It was Fran who was blushing bright red. Kamijou was finally knocked from the balloon in reality instead of an illusion. But there was no sensation of falling and his butt landed on a nearby steel beam.

The hoodie bikini girl had apparently moved the balloon over toward the wall.

"Honestly, this is the problem with boys. Mutter, mutter. Give them the chance and they'll justify everything they do… Why do they only ever use their brains when it comes to making their actions seem legitimate…?"

A misunderstanding seemed underway at tremendous speed, but she would probably say something about using his brains if he made any kind of excuse, so

he left that untouched.

Kamijou decided to change tack a little.

“W-well, I’m not sure you can say that about all boys. Eh heh. Eh heh heh. I mean, what about Kamisato?”

“That bastard was the victim type of pervert that would naturally take all the juicy bits for himself!! If all the boys in the world would end *like that* just by standing there, I’d sink into despair!!”

“Hmm,” said Mina. “It seems to me like a very bad idea to bring up that name so soon after she had her heart broken, but are you the type that enjoys bullying the girl you like?”

When Mina appeared in the air, Kamijou’s briefly numbed feelings came surging back. He was reminded of what he had seen. Of the tuning point that sent a human’s life tumbling down.

He breathed in and out.

He wiped the sweat from his brow.

He did not care what anyone said about him.

Kamijou spoke to the person only he could see.

“…Mina…”

“What is it?”

The Black Cat Witch stood next to him and looked down at him.

As usual, she did not bat an eye.

“What happens after that? What happens to that ‘human’!?”

“Again, that leads to the Board Chairman Aleister Crowley you see in the present.”

“That’s not what I’m asking about!! Send me *there* right away!!”

“Every man and every woman is a star.” Mina Mathers whispered what sounded like a password. “When each individual is aware how they should act and fulfills those actions, there will be no meaningless work in this world. If you seek

something, you must walk on your own feet and reach out your own hand."

"…"

Kamijou Touma looked out ahead with utter exhaustion in his eyes.

He saw window cleaning gondolas, crane hooks, and ropeways. As before, he would have to scale a deadly mountain using only unstable footing.

But he no longer hesitated.

It did not matter how unreliable the footing was. It did not matter whether or not they were being pursued by a pair of beasts with rainbow chains and transparent flesh and blood.

He wanted to know the whole history of that human's wandering.

"Hey, human."

"…? Othinus???"

Then a 15cm god spoke to him by climbing up onto a window cleaning gondola's railing. She had apparently climbed this high under her own power. The world had to have looked very different at Othinus's scale.

"I won't tell you not to go running ahead. That would be like telling a bird not to fly or a fish not to swim. But if you do start running, don't give into despair. Abandoning thought is just being lazy. When you're running recklessly forward is exactly when you need to remain calm. You need to make use of all your power to return alive."

"…Yeah."

After he nodded, Othinus climbed up his clothes to her usual spot on his right shoulder. If he took one wrong step, she would plummet to the bottom with him, but he did not feel a single tremor from her body.

"Hey, Othinus. Have you seen Index or Tsuchimikado? They don't seem to be here either."

"Talking about another girl already? No, maybe I should interpret that as your normal behavior and be relieved."

"Othinus-san?"

“Sniff, sniff. …And you are covered in a mixture of a few odd scents.”

“Hm? Is that because of the weird visions Mina’s been showing me…?”

“You held more than one girl in your arms on the way here, didn’t you? Really, how could you not notice you were getting these indecent smells on you? Honestly…”

“Why are you so irritated!? Let’s get serious before you sink into a bog of your own making!”

Othinus was in a very bad mood, but she seemed intent on sticking with him to the end.

Kamijou looked back toward Maika and Fran.

“If you don’t think you can go any further, you don’t have to follow me. If you stay on the narrow footing, those handcuff and gear beasts, human karma, mountain devilishness, or whatever they are can’t appear around you. I’ll head to the top and see if the others are up there.”

“I-I want to see for myself that Aniki’s okay.”

“And I can safely get to the top with my spare balloon as long as you all don’t get in the way.”

Those did not seem like logical or efficient opinions.

If they simply sought safety, it may have been much better to remain on the window cleaning gondola.

But Kamijou did not force his opinion onto them.

Perhaps that was due to the lamentation of that “human”. Perhaps it was because he had indirectly felt that magician’s intense emotion after being unable to see his daughter’s death for himself.

“Understood. It’s your decision. It’s not my place to tell you what to do.”

Now that they knew what to do, they only had to do it.

They were fortunate to have Fran and her balloon that could continue up no matter what. By passing her belt-like makeshift ropes made from multiple layers of duct tape, she could pass the rope along routes they normally could not have reached. She could tie two crane hooks together to create a V-shaped wire or she

could use two horizontal ropes to attach a window cleaning gondola to a midair ropeway and place zigzagging tape between them to create a makeshift bridge.

It felt a lot like athletically moving from one cliff face to another by clinging to the wire strung between them. But their odds of survival were much better than using the midair swings as they jumped from one pendulum-like hook to another.

“And…there.”

In her chic maid uniform, Maika held onto a vertical duct tape lifeline as she reached her tense legs from one footing to another.

“Nnnn!”

“The view from below is incredible,” said Mina. “Yes, look at her tremble… This is a strange feeling you can never get from a miniskirt café model.”

“…The rest of us can’t float, so if we tried that, we’d fall to our deaths.”

True to her self-proclaimed title of witch, she may have loved tempting people onto wicked paths. Either that or she was one of the unfortunate people who always messed with the camera to see how low an angle they could get in an RPG or shooting game.

“Placing a burden on all of your muscles in a specific order might count as a variation of yoga. Crowley focused on that while mountain climbing.”

“You hag, the way you place a hand above your eyes when focusing on something really does make you seem old.”

“…Was someone just insulting me?” cut in the hoodie bikini girl’s words like a curse.

The trouble was about to spread, so Kamijou decided to stop speaking with Mina who had a way of causing misunderstandings.

As they climbed higher, the scenery changed again.

Footing was still sparse. The mountain climbing route was still devastating and consisted entirely of objects hanging from the heavens by wires. But instead of window cleaning gondolas and crane hooks, Kamijou and the others saw fairy tale 5-pointed stars and cradle-like crescent moons. They were all a few meters across and it felt like jumping between gorgeous chandeliers. If not for the terrible fear of heights, they should have provided enough footing, but…

“How high up are we now…?” Kamijou wondered aloud.

Unlike true mountain climbing, the air did not seem to grow thinner and colder as they climbed. No matter how strange it seemed, they were still inside the Windowless Building, so the temperature, pressure, and humidity may have been kept at a certain value.

The giant tower ignored three-dimensional space as it rose toward the heavens.

And they had finally reached fake stars and moons.

…This should have been an impossible height. Checking the distance from the surface to the outer atmosphere in an online encyclopedia was enough to know that. That was not a distance that human legs could clear in a day. But at the same time, this was an alternate-dimensional space where Euclidean geometry did not apply. The distance of each step did not necessary match up with the distance they had actually traveled. Plus, they were surrounded by giant walls on every side. With no view outside, there was nothing to judge the distance by.

Would they really make their way to outer space like this?

That absurd thought entered his mind.

“Oh?”

Until now, Fran had flown freely around with her balloon to create spider webs of duct tape for them, but now the hoodie bikini girl sounded surprised.

Fran’s butt was pressed against the side of a simplified star like the kind seen at the top of a Christmas tree. It was almost like she had fallen onto a soft cushion.

Confused, Kamijou asked a question.

“Eh? Eh? What just happened? Some kind of adhesive? Or a magnet???”

“I don’t know…but it felt like I fell toward the star…?”

On the boy’s shoulder, Othinus crossed both her arms and legs as she sighed.

“Artificial gravity? Curse that ‘human’. Is he working to acquire even the forces of the planet?”

Kamijou did not understand how this worked.

Artificial gravity brought to mind a small room spinning around to produce

centrifugal force, but he had no idea how people or objects could be pulled toward the surface of a small sphere like this.

Or…

If the actual matter was far denser than the apparent volume, could it be given the same powerful universal gravitation as a normal planet?

“No, that wouldn’t work… It wouldn’t make sense for it to be dangling from a single wire then. And if it was that dense, it would be a scorching hell like the earth’s core.”

There were exceptions such as a black hole that created gravity powerful enough to distort the surrounding space and had no material core, but that too could not explain this. Or rather, that would not allow one to adjust the gravity to the desired level. There were only two options: a micro black hole that could only be observed through data or a macro black hole that would swallow up the entire solar system if it formed. Even an esper who could directly manipulate gravitons had only been able to produce explosions.

“Being able to convert the proper methods into any universal power does sound like his kind of theory. I doubt you will find the answer with the knowledge found in a high school textbook, human.”

“I’m not interested in being an intellectual. I just want to know if Imagine Breaker will destroy it or if it can support me.”

With that, Kamijou reached his hand out toward the closest crescent moon.

And that acted like a trigger.

He had already had a hunch… it was about time.

Reality and illusion crossed over, the crescent moon crumbled away without warning, and Kamijou Touma was overcome by a far too real sensation of falling.

Part 11

“Let us begin with the answers you wanted. We will be returning to the Golden age. This happened before he married Rose and was given Lilith.”

It was a toxic foggy city covered in steam and smoke.

There was a whistling that sounded like a draft, but it was actually the breath escaping a man's throat in a study. Even with no knowledge of medicine, one look at his face was enough to know his organs were far from healthy. Enough so that he looked like an old man in the deeply contrasting shadows created by the lamp's flame.

"Allan Bennett. He was one of the few people who Aleister Crowley could call a true friend and teacher who, unlike Mathers, had no ulterior motive," said Mina next to Kamijou. "There is nothing to say about his condition. These are merely the symptoms of addiction to medical opium used as a pain reliever. This was a social pathology found everywhere at the time."

That master was of course not the only one in the study.

This was Aleister Crowley's story.

"…In other words, it is the same as my body," Allan said to his visitor.

He flipped over several cards sitting atop a heavy desk. Kamijou did not know the details, but when he saw those cards that looked like playing cards with more involved artwork, the word tarot came to mind.

Whether the stories were true or not, what was it those tools were used for?

The man continued through his cracked lips.

"Everyone is a slave to miracles and fortune. Even the way you choose your daily bread interferes without your knowledge. And that interference can involve people's lives. Just as I chose the wrong medicine and it has stuck with me ever since."

Kamijou gulped because he had cheated.

He had already seen how this turned out.

"That was the meaning behind Crowley's journey," said Mina. "He was searching for a way to protect his daughter who was at the mercy of the phases and sparks and who would suddenly lose her life in but a few years. …And just as the cards showed, he did not make it in time."

As she gave her smooth answer, the mourning clothes woman looked down at Kamijou's right hand.

Imagine Breaker.

Hadn't he heard a joking theory about it tearing apart invisible fortune and thus providing him with misfortune?

"Phases? Sparks? What are you talking about? What does any of that have to do with his daughter?"

"Allan will explain."

The Black Cat Witch was correct.

Allan Bennett swept aside the cards and moved his lips.

"Magic is convenient. If our Golden cabal completes its simple *work kit*, we can break back open our stagnated knowledge without needing to fear the toxins of an original grimoire. After all, that toxin is the result of the reader's mind rejecting such a great discrepancy from their common knowledge and wisdom. If it can all be explained through their own words and fingertips, that gap can be filled and no one must suffer. Once the long lines are gone and people no longer need to determine which of the higher ranks have authentic knowledge, the entire organization will grow much more quickly. With a collective device to answer the questions of master and apprentice alike, our direct combat strength will grow. But normally, all phenomena in this world are bound by the principle of equivalent exchange. Our magic cheats the system to provide an input of 1 for an output of 10. …However, are we truly deceiving the world? Perhaps we are merely shifting the cost beyond what we can imagine. We have long held that concern."

"…"

"This world contains as many phases as there are divine legends and religions. And the distance between each phase is not even. The rise and fall of civilizations and traditions affect the power balance in the real world. When you get down to it, fortune is the sparks that failed to become miracles. The spray produced by the contact and collision between phases has a shockingly thin but widespread influence on people. It affects coin tosses, the order at which dishes are served at a restaurant, meetings and partings, marriages and divorces…and even people's deaths. If you see no direct cause for your daughter's death, you should assume it is a spontaneous event caused by a gathering of the influence that so many people are unwittingly affected by."

"You mean there is no such thing as a spontaneous accident or illness in this world?" asked the silver-haired young man. "You mean the small things that

people accumulate are an issue of the overlapping phases and, as a result, the entire world will cause slightly unsanitary conditions to force a deadly illness onto my daughter? Is that what you are saying, teacher?"

"That is taking it a bit far. Your daughter is nothing special. Everyone is affected by it equally. But a unified theory like Hermeticism roughly grabs and gathers the overlapping phases, causing them to collide all the more. I imagine that would make the sparks more frequent. And this will influence more than just the present. The future is made from the present, after all."

"And the Golden cabal understood that danger but tolerated it?"

"A phenomenon which cannot be measured may as well not exist. That is what Mathers said, but it would be the weakness of our hearts that allowed us to let that opinion stand."

The gap between phases changed irregularly on a daily basis. There was nothing an individual could do about it. Even as the nations fought for supremacy and glared at each other across their borders, the world's continents were slowly moving. Not even the greatest world powers could stop that movement. In that case, weren't the conflicts on the surface trivial matters?

What if Mathers had continued his magical research with that sort of thinking?

What if the collective anonymous questioning device began to function?

"There was a way of exorcising it," said Allan Bennett. "Although Westcott and Mathers never publicly admitted it, there was an unspoken understanding that it was not a problem as long as they had *the treasure at Blythe Road* and that they would be fine as long as they possessed it. Edward, you too were protected by that. That is why they saw no problem with what you were doing."

But that would only protect him, the magician.

They said they could not pass their protection onto those who were not there and they did not bother to reveal the protective charm already hidden in their pocket. It was like they knew felling the trees of the forest would eventually turn the planet into a desert, but they continued cheerfully with no concern for those who would starve in the future.

Even now, all sorts of magic was being performed across the world.

No one knew what emotions people would be given by the pressure between phases and the sparks that produced. When lives were thrown out of that shallow

and widespread current, there may not have been an overall cause or conspiracy behind it. And that was why it was nearly impossible to nip that disaster in the bud.

Yes.

What if?

Aleister Crowley himself had so often performed magic below an invisible umbrella and thus with no sense of danger, but what if that too had been wrapped in the same wickedness as the magic of those he so despised?

"…"

"Are you going?"

"If the sparks brought by invisible collisions will not end, then I see no reason not to take action."

"Then why did you visit me? The best way to overcome the disadvantage of being outnumbered is to use the element of surprise."

"I wanted to take a necessary item from you."

"You already have everything you need."

Still seated, Allan Bennett gestured as if he were gently grabbing something.

There had been nothing there before.

But something odd flashed in the master's hand. They looked like sparks from a lighter's flint. But they scattered through the air as small numbers.

28, 4, 29.

And then the master's hand held a twisted staff made of silver.

"I am altering the scene here," whispered the Black Cat Witch. "Normally this would be invisible to all but Crowley who it is directed towards, but I will place it here as an objective image. After all, nothing is as empty as an explanation you cannot understand."

"…But that's all you've been giving me."

But time passed as Kamijou made his exasperated comment.

“You should have already learned it all perfectly. Although it may only look like one of the abominable powers which will take your daughter’s life and tear your family apart.”

Allan opened his hand and the staff disappeared once more.

But this was *not* the Blasting Rod that Allan Bennett was known for.

It was actually a usage of the technique known as Spiritual Tripping.

The man tapped his bony fingers on the ebony desk in front of him.

“A war is about to begin.”

“…”

“Will that power take your target’s life or take away the possibility for life? …In other words, even if they survive, they will essentially bear a curse saying that, *from that point on, every choice they ever make will end in failure.* Everyone who is ‘killed’ by you will despair and be doomed to a life that continues eternally downhill without ever rising once more. In a way, this will be a living hell that is much crueler than simple death.”

His exhalation sounded like a broken flute.

“And prepare yourself. If you announce that you will destroy the entire Golden cabal for the daughter you will one day lose to a spontaneous death, you must also turn those fangs back toward yourself and eliminate Magician Aleister Crowley. You can never truly achieve your original objective without cursing yourself as your own nemesis and swallowing the poison you have concocted.”

“I am aware of that.”

“You can of course compromise there. You can always meet your desire for vengeance halfway. But then it would lose its purity and become no more than an empty shell. The instant you hold back for fear of losing your own life or assets, your feelings for your daughter will grow dull and rusted. Keep that in mind.”

“I am aware of that.”

Hearing the exact same response again, the pale master gently smiled as if no more words were necessary.

It was the kind and sad look of the master seeing his student surpassing him.

And then Magician Allan Bennett said more.

“Then hurry up and kill me. One of your nemeses sits right here.”

He could compromise with his vengeance.

But the instant he did, the feelings within him would grow dull and rusted.

So it did not matter how much he respected this man or how close they were.

Since this man was a magician of the Golden cabal, Aleister Crowley could not overlook the master before his eyes.

Allan never did stand from his chair.

Even if his body had been worn away by an ignorant and juvenile medical prescription, he too was a magician who represented the Golden cabal. He had produced that silver staff from thin air earlier, so if he had wanted to, he surely could have fought back against the assassin paying him a visit.

But he did not.

Allan had not welcomed the young man as a magician or a teacher. He had welcomed him as a lonely man does a good friend.

His cards had likely already told him his fate.

“…”

Aleister Crowley started to shake his head.

But the unwavering look in Allan Bennett’s eyes prevented him from doing so. To those who accurately divined fate, different positions on the timeline were a trivial matter. As his master, the man was celebrating his student’s marriage. He felt hatred for that which would tear apart that happiness. And he felt regret toward himself for his inability to change it despite having sensed it in advance.

The silver-haired young man reached out his right hand. He stuck out his thumb and forefinger in a handgun gesture.

32, 30, 10.

Just like the old man, he seemed to guide scattering numbers in his hand.

And then the man held an old-fashioned flintlock gun.

That attack would directly take a life or doom them to a life of ruin that could never recover.

Allan Bennett smiled as that fingertip aimed toward his forehead.

“Take care.”

Whether it was real or an illusion, a definite gunshot sounded and the man’s head jerked backwards.

Part 12

…Why?

Why had this happened? It took Kamijou Touma a while to realize he had returned from his vision.

Even with Imagine Breaker, he was perfectly able to grab at the stars and moons dangling down from wires. …Did that mean they were not products of magic and the artificial gravity had been created through purely scientific means?

He and the others did not need a lifeline.

They leaped between stars, crossing over the empty space at thousands, if not tens of thousands, of meters up. They could not choose which part the artificial gravity pulled at them or how, so Maika’s long maid skirt would sometimes rise up like an umbrella in a typhoon and Hoodie Bikini Fran would sometimes land on all fours with her small butt sticking up. Regardless, they continued the impossible mountain ascent with no major problems.

“It’s already ending,” said Kamijou with no real proof.

He could not explain his reasoning to himself, so Maika, Fran, and Othinus had to find it even more baffling. But he repeated himself.

“We’re approaching the end. There was no other way from the beginning.”

There was an end point in the starry sky.

And a familiar face was clinging to the side of the large star dangling there.

“Index?”

“I didn’t see you on the way here, so was the way up split into a few different paths?” she wondered. “Or did the rest of you fall farther down in the beginning?”

She had the calico cat with her.

While in Index’s arms, it threw cat punches toward Mina who the others could not see.

“Oh? It would seem I am no match for wild instincts.”

“…? Does that mean it isn’t that only I can see you? Are you actually preventing the others from seeing you?”

“I am the Black Cat Witch. I seem to bring them under my control whether I intend to or not.”

And it was obvious why Index had stopped here.

Kamijou looked straight up.

“A black hole, hm?” Othinus sounded exasperated as she sat on his right shoulder. “The scale here is as ridiculous as ever.”

Straight above, something like a black galaxy swirled around as if to indicate a presence on an even higher level. No human had directly seen a black hole, so they did not know if this was accurate, but with the artificial gravity produced by the previous stars and moons, it seemed likely this was a tunnel modeled after a black hole.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Index. “Why is this going so smoothly? If even a single ladder had been removed, we would have been stuck. It’s almost like this is a form of training we have to complete in advance.”

“…”

If they jumped in there, it would take them somewhere.

But Kamijou Touma felt like there was something he had to do before that.

He leaped from the final star toward the black hole, but his suspicions were confirmed.

The black hole did not suck him in.

He instead plummeted downwards.

Part 13

This was the appropriate form for a magic battle. That was the whole of it.

The foggy city's steam and smoke were sliced apart. Even the darkness of London's night was swept aside by the bright flashes of light. There were two magicians there. Those monsters had attempted to swallow up and take over the Golden cabal which was the world's greatest. Even the Jack who had terrified the public by attacking prostitutes in the dark of the night would have trembled and fled had he seen their clash.

Magician Aleister Crowley.

Magician Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers.

"Ghh!!"

A rusty-smelling liquid dripped to the stone pavement.

It could be a gun, a sword, a shield, or a bow. Aleister changed the shape of his fingertips, numbers scattered from his hand, and the corresponding type of illusionary attack power appeared there.

It could be a fire wand, a water cup, a wind dagger, or an earth disc. Mathers controlled all things on the material level by sending those symbolic weapons floating around him.

Their clash was never-ending.

And if it would not end, it was obvious who had the advantage.

"You fool… If you had stuck with me, you could have received the scraps of my success!!"

"…"

“Your future daughter? Isn’t there a simple way of solving that without harming anyone? Just never have a child. If Aleister Crowley has no daughter, the fangs of death cannot close upon her!”

“Then why did you marry, Mathers? It could not have just been a means of bringing a talented painter into the organization. Even if you never verbalized it in your mind, there must have been a reason why it had to be the woman named Mina.”

“Don’t give me that look…”

“Even if we know it will lead to definite failure or danger, there are some things we desire to a maddening extent. You cannot expect magicians to be stoics who ignore the workings of their own body, Mathers. Without even looking at the story of Tristan and Isolde, it is clear that love is a poison and family a narcotic. That is how people work. And that is why they have appeared in the lineup of the cards as an inescapable inevitability. This is a result that cannot be changed.”

“I said don’t give me that look! I am the leader of the Golden cabal!!” roared Mathers as he wielded powerful explosive flames like a part of his own body. “A cabal does not just refer to the individual magicians. If one of us rebels, the group will crush them. Aleister, you should have declared victory only once you were in a position to have the group do your bidding! Like I am here!!”

“…!!”

Aleister was not reacting to Mathers as he fell back.

Several people appeared on the surrounding rooftops.

Dion Fortune.

Paul Foster Case.

Arthur Edward Waite.

Robert William Felkin.

“My reinforcements are unlimited. All magicians must obey the cabal’s decisions. As long as I stand at the top, anyway.” Mathers wiped blood from his mouth and put on a fierce smile. “It’s time you learned what a hunted fox feels like, rebel. The primary reason you lost was your inability to stop your battle from being rewritten with the word ‘rebellion’!!”

“So after all your talk of masters and apprentices being equal, you’re still an

authoritarian who looks down on everyone from a special position reserved only for yourself.”

The action Aleister took was simple.

He immediately turned around and vanished into the steam and smoke.

“Oh, foolish Mathers, my beloved,” whispered the Black Cat Witch as if reminiscing on the distant past.

She viewed this ended world through her veil.

“That man was caught in the organization’s selection process, had his beloved daughter driven out from the protective umbrella, and felt burning inferiority and intense emotion at having to rely on the same power as his hated enemies… And as he raged with anger, did you really think he would continue to rely on logic and efficiency and make a strategic retreat?”

“What…?”

“It is beginning,” clearly stated Mina Mathers. Her tone seemed to say this was the moment for which she wore the mourning clothes and led around the black cats which symbolized bad luck. “The Battle of Blythe Road. The quiet armed conflict in which Magician Aleister Crowley directly faced the world’s largest magic cabal.”

The stage changed.

A man holding a twisted silver staff blended into London’s darkness.

Crowley was on his way to 36 Blythe Road, Hammersmith. The Golden cabal’s most important ceremonial ground was located there.

Despite being referred to as a “war”, what he did was not all that flashy.

All alone, he forced himself into the building, swept aside the few magicians who were maintaining and inspecting the equipment inside, locked all of the exits, and holed up inside.

“…What is he doing?” asked Kamijou. “Won’t he just be surrounded?”

“That was acceptable for him. Aleister did not need to win this battle.”

“What?”

“Winning and losing meant nothing so long as the fact that he fought remained. You will understand soon enough.”

A quill in the office area sliced through empty air.

It grazed Crowley’s cheek and raced across the stationery on a heavy desk there.

Flowing writing appeared.

Mina must have been providing assistance because the meaning of the words entered Kamijou’s head.

“What is the meaning of this, Aleister? I have already parted ways with you. I do not recall ordering you to occupy Blythe Road!!”

When he read that automatic writing, Aleister Crowley silently formed a smile.

…After this, he would get married despite knowing it would end in failure. And his fingertips would be gently held by a tiny hand. This was an expression that would never be made by this “human” after that.

“But that is the truth of this shallow world,” he said. “All members of the Golden cabal will assume that Aleister Crowley, a mere pawn, occupied the Blythe Road ceremonial ground on the official orders of Mathers. In order to take everything away from the Westcott faction. …It’s a strange thing, Mathers. They will think that even though you do not recall signing such an order.”

“You can’t mean…”

“Yes, yes. Did you think I made a nearly suicidal attack on you for no reason? I wanted your blood. With a single drop, forging a document was quite simple. In fact…*didn’t Westcott forge a letter from Anna Sprengel to give the organization more prestige when creating the cabal*?”

“Damn you!!”

The scene changed.

In a location *nowhere near* Blythe Road, a furious-looking Westcott Mathers stormed into Mathers’ headquarters. He was not the only one breaking through the thick door. Just as Mathers had his faction, the Westcott faction also incorporated half of the Golden cabal.

“What is the meaning of this, Mathers!? Blythe Road is the foundation of the cabal in London. This has gone beyond anything you can weasel out of by claiming

it was the individual action of that failure Crowley!!"

"But it was!!"

"You know Scotland Yard is keeping an eye on me. They do not like that a civil servant like a coroner is participating in such suspicious meetings. Maintaining any connections below the surface is risky enough, so you are quite the strategist to intentionally create friction within the cabal!"

"That really isn't it! That document was-…"

Mathers trailed off as he seemed to realize something.

The Black Cat Witch sighed.

"If they had been meeting alone, Westcott and Mathers might have been able to cool their heads and reach a compromise."

But…

"With so many of their subordinates here, Westcott would never accept it if Mathers insisted this was *the same forgery method Westcott had used*. If he did accept it, his authority would plummet down to earth."

"Then…"

"Yes," announced the widow dressed in mourning garb. "A single intentional defeat pulled the trigger of a great war between the Westcott and Mathers factions that controlled the Golden cabal."

From there, a hellish scene played out.

Flames danced. Wind sliced. And it not all of it was that simple. Strange beasts were unleashed while curses and diseases ran rampant through the London darkness. Even if this was the age when Jack the Ripper had used the curtain of steam and smoke to work in secret, how had the people of London accepted and comprehended these strange phenomena?

And of course, Aleister Crowley's battle was not yet over.

"He never expected the two sides to entirely wipe each other out. One side was sure to win and the survivors would take over. …All he wanted to cause was chaos. And then he could slip into the confusion to sneak in close enough to stab both sides before they saw him coming. To the end, Crowley only ever thought of fulfilling his revenge by his own hand."

The Blythe Road ceremonial ground was also an armory for the Golden cabal.

After retrieving the necessary tools from there, the silver-haired young man returned to the noisy London darkness.

“In this age of rational magicians, Crowley was one of the few who actively approved of blood offerings.”

He was cunning.

When he killed a Westcott faction magician in a back alley, he carved traces of the Mathers faction into the corpse before dumping it on the main road.

When he killed a Mathers faction magician in an underground tunnel, he placed a Westcott faction weapon next to it before leaving.

“Even these tricks were only a front. People will be blinded to the truth as long as they see the malice of trickery. They will assume there is nothing more than this. He was the one who concluded it would take covering the entire planet with blood to guide his great ceremony to success. The sight of washing out blood with blood placed Crowley in a state similar to perpetual motion.”

…No, this went beyond a direct clash between the two factions.

Scotland Yard would want to divulge everything that happened, those in the New World would seek a version of the occult backed by greater tradition, the old witch lodges felt their place in the world had been taken by the Golden cabal, and spiritualists with no sense of danger would want to contact them. Everyone who wanted to get involved in this would be drawn to London and the existing power balance would be entirely destroyed. The greater the organization, the more complexly its gears fit together.

The vortex of indiscriminate destruction and chaos was like a marble pattern.

It swallowed everything and chewed it up. The hatred produced more hatred.

When blood was shed by magic, that blood would be used for the next attack.

As the battle escalated further, it created larger openings. It produced an opportunity to secretly enter areas that would normally be unreachable.

This was a path of carnage in which he killed an enemy, changed weapons, and continually resupplied in that way.

And eventually, a dull sound burst out somewhere.

"…Bh?"

The first one to produce a dumbfounded expression was Westcott.

He slowly looked down and saw *that* piercing his side.

"Westcott's magical ability was said to be not all that great," explained Mina. "At least when compared to true eccentrics such as Mathers and Crowley. …And yet he still managed to control a powerful faction as one of the Three Founders thanks to his quasi-immortality."

"Quasi…immortality…?"

"I will omit what exactly that entails. But I will say that he specialized in forging documents. And as a coroner, he had the opportunity to contact more corpses than the average person. Also… in our world, parchment was used to converse with demons and transfer souls. But Crowley stabbed straight through that assumption with an attack using the treasure he had brought from Blythe Road."

A single arrow was piercing the old man's side.

But it was not made of metal or wood. It looked like muddy-colored wax. The tip branched out into five twisted prongs. Almost like a hand trying to grab at something…

"The arrowhead is made of bone, the feathers are made of leather, and the shaft is made of wax. …But not just any wax; the grave wax created from flesh and blood."

In other words…

"*Imagine Breaker. The ultimate exorcising spiritual item created from a certain Saint's right hand. It was originally the most secret of weapons meant to drive an uncontrolled being back beyond the magic circle after a failed summoning.*"

Even as a mere spectator, Kamijou Touma felt his breath catch in his throat.

"B-bhboh…"

Westcott had never doubted the absolute strength of his quasi-immortality and he was unable to even pull out the thin arrow now that it was taken from him.

"Bhbohbhaaa

Aleister Crowley's eyes did not waver.

With the arrow still in hand, he formed a handgun gesture with his other hand and several numbers danced from that hand like sparks: 32, 30, 10. Then the illusion gun fired an impact that sent Westcott's body flying backwards.

"I have altered the scene again," softly added Mina. "I am sure you understand after seeing it before, but that is a weapon that can only be seen by the one it targets. I am merely placing an objective view of it here."

Meanwhile, time continued to pass.

As nonexistent gun smoke floated around him, Aleister whispered words that sounded like a curse.

"An arrow holds the meaning of a spiritualized attack. It should have thrown off the yoke of the physical once it was launched… but as it negates all supernatural powers, it ironically seeks the physical instead, Westcott."

The 5 branches of the arrow's tip seemed to have torn into the old man's flesh and blood. Specifically, the container of his soul, the red mass at the center of his chest. The old man had been torn to pieces within the wound when that was forcibly ripped out, but Crowley ignored him and turned around with the bloody arrow still in hand.

His nemesis stood there.

Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers.

When Crowley stuck out his tongue and licked off the blood that had splattered onto his own face, the ruler of the Golden cabal took a few steps back with a stiff expression on his face. The wand, cup, dagger, and disc symbolic weapons floating around him took a clearly defensive formation.

"Do you find it that hard to accept the death and ruin of a single person?"

"…"

"All lives are born and vanish! Most leave nothing behind and are no more than common weeds that must force themselves to believe they are happy and successful!! You could have redone it. Even as you lamented the daughter who was rejected by the friction between phases and sparks of the world, you could have created a new life! Yes, yes! That's all it was! You could have *remade* her as many times as necessary!!"

The conversation ended there.

Aleister forcefully threw the arrow that had pierced a magician's life. Mathers had his floating symbolic weapons of fire, water, wind, and earth move to intercept. He lost many great weapons, sacrificed one of his arms, and even then only just barely managed to stop the arrow of the dead.

An invisible explosion burst from within the flesh of the master's arm and the legend of Imagine Breaker vanished from this age.

And where did it go?

That was obvious: down a different path that eventually led to Kamijou Touma.

The boy could not help but look down at his own right hand.

"…"

But the Golden leader should have realized something.

This was not the arrow's revenge; it was Aleister Crowley's revenge.

The silver-haired man altered his stance. As soon as he gestured as if he held something in both hands, numbers scattered from them like sparks from a lighter's flint: 1, 27, 5. Then a double-edged sword appeared in his hands.

The gigantic sword was nearly as tall as he was and looked like something from a children's book.

It was the steel sword of a great king.

There was no point in discussing the laws of physics here. If someone had been able to bring a radar device here, the reflected waves would not have detected anything there.

This deadly weapon sliced directly into someone's perception.

It used a technique of conveying one's meditation to someone else.

It was the magic known as Spiritual Tripping. The name did not sound very sharp, but it linked the user's body to the target's just like with a voodoo doll and it synced up their motions. But this usage allowed the user into the target's mind. The gesture would send the power of the indicated weapon into the target's mind.

"Oh, Mathers, my foolish spouse," said the Black Cat Witch. "If you had not been so obsessed with the details and if you had kept your eyes on your true enemy even if it let that arrow shatter your breastbone, you would have had a way out of this."

Mathers was slow to react as the other man stepped forward.

The man swung the giant sword diagonally down with both hands and the nonexistent blade dug deep, deep down into Mathers' torso through his shoulder.

"A clay…more…?"

“This is a tribute, so rejoice, self-styled highlander. I finished you off with the sword you so loved.”

It did not matter here whether or not it physically existed. Either way, it tore through Mathers’ body and dark red liquid erupted from within.

Only one man remained standing.

Aleister Crowley made a quiet announcement to the end of his ideal.

“Now you will either die or have all possibility of success stripped from you as you live out the rest of your days in despair. It is time you withered away, sinner.”

“Crow…ley.”

“You see, Mathers, this is not a mere outburst of anger at being unable to stop the spontaneous death of a life that has yet to be born.”

Unable to swing it all the way through the man’s body, the sword had stopped partway through, so Aleister whispered to him from close range.

“The world is filled with such tragedy. The sunny parts of this world are simply overflowing with tragedy. Everyone should be enraged and stand up against it, but they claim it can’t be helped and they give up! That is where my sorrow lies!!”

“Aleister Crowleyyy

question it all like normal!!”

He had to know the truth.

Aleister Crowley was also a magician of the Golden cabal.

If he was to curse the entire cabal, he could not disobey the rule saying he too must swallow the special poison he himself had concocted.

“That’s…why…?” asked Kamijou.

“Yes.”

“Success and failure don’t matter. No, he works under the assumption that nothing he attempts will go the way he wants it to. Is that because he too walks *a path where all possibility has been taken from him*!?”

“This was not a clear end to the Golden cabal. Even after the large organization broke apart, it broke into smaller cabals claiming to be its successor. They tied on splints and spent a *long, long* time like a large tree rotting away. But as they declined, nothing remained of its former glory. Many people attempted to bring back the Golden cabal. But as history shows, none of them succeeded in regathering the personnel and materials. They all worked to achieve their goals, but every last one of those dreams was shattered before completion and they sank into disappointment and despair jut as Aleister Crowley had announced.”

Kamijou knew Birdway’s cabal claimed to be of the Golden variety, but would it be hard to say it was the pure form of the Golden?

“And,” added the Black Cat Witch. “Aleister Crowley himself was deported a few times and was unable to maintain an environment for any major magical research. Finally, in 1947, his death was announced on British land. At the end of his quiet war, the avenger who had hunted down every last one of the cabal’s magicians stayed true to his own rules and turned his blade on himself in the very end.”

His battle had not yet ended.

That was why he was in Academy City and standing in Kamijou Touma’s way.

Which meant…

“Even after conquering the Battle of Blythe Road and turning his blade on himself…he still could not overturn the common disease that took Lilith’s life. That was more than enough for him to thoroughly give up on the laws of god that

he had already cursed since childhood."

As the enemy of all magic, he had spent 50 or even 100 years creating a new term: the science side. Modern science had robbed the occult of its legitimacy, made scientific investigation and examinations the symbol of "correctness", won the position of widespread acceptance, and spread a mentality akin to science worship in which the scientific was considered correct and the data was considered absolute.

Everything he did would fail. Even if he tried to use that to his advantage, it would still work against him.

But even as he was forced onto that hopelessly harsh and thorny path and even as the entire world worked to trip him up, he had advanced his game pieces this far.

Aleister Crowley would never stop.

He assumed he would be obstructed and he expected to fail. After coming so far with that mindset, that magician would show no surprise and continue on as normal no matter what obstacle might stand in his way.

"He intends to destroy all phases," whispered Mina Mathers, someone else who had once lost to Crowley and vanished in the depths of disappointment and despair. "So that everyone can laugh like normal and cry like normal. So that every man and every woman is a star. So that the people can be freed from the sparks created by the collisions between phases and from the spray that failed to become miracles. So that he can build a world that is built up by the accumulated efforts of individuals and not influenced by prayers or divine punishment. Only once he achieves that will he believe he has truly fulfilled his duty as a father."

Part 14

…Kamijou Touma had finally seen it all.

Her role must have been complete because the Black Cat Witch was gone.

"…"

Kamijou did not hesitate.

Along with the others, he jumped into the object overhead that resembled a black hole. It felt something like an elevator traveling through a tube. It did not take long, but he had no idea how far they had actually traveled. He only knew they had been sent far overhead.

And the scene at the end of the mountain ascent was not the end of the universe or the center of the Big Bang.

“Stairs…?” whispered Index.

Yes, a spiraling stairway wrapped around the large space. Instead of stone or metal, it seemed to be made of smooth porcelain or glass.

Othinus sighed from the boy’s shoulder.

“Is this the ring of the snake biting its own tail? No, it might just be the stairway up to heaven.”

And someone bloody sat on the very first step.

“Hi, Kami-yan.”

“Tsuchimikado!!”

Was this the side effect of using magic to protect the others, or had he been forced to use magic a few times after they had been separated? Either way, Tsuchimikado’s clothing was stained a dark red.

“A-Aniki…!!”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t worry. I didn’t want you to see this, but, well, it’s nothing to worry about. I’ve survived this plenty of times before, so I’ll survive it here too.”

Kamijou doubted that meant anything. Just because you had survived every game of Russian roulette so far did not guarantee the next one would be fine. But Tsuchimikado had probably wanted to reassure his stepsister even if it was a lie.

“So you’ll…be okay?”

“Even I’m surprised by that one. It almost makes me think there was some meaning in having my wounds open when I got here… Like I was being told to wait here until you all caught up.”

“…”

Aleister Crowley.

Success and failure did not matter. No matter the result when the die was cast, that magician would turn it into the trigger needed to advance down his path. Deciding it was useless to think about it would only turn you into a puppet, but suspecting that everything had meaning would mean restricting yourself for no good reason.

“Let’s go, Kami-yan. It doesn’t matter how much he toys with us. We win as long as we get the last laugh.”

“…Yeah.”

With that, Kamijou started thinking.

Had the Board Chairman really laid some cunning trap up ahead?

Was it truly logic and efficiency that ruled that magician?

Kamijou had seen his war.

He was like dry ice. He was supposedly extremely cold, but he was hot enough to burn all he touched. Which was Aleister Crowley’s true core? Kamijou could not find an easy answer.

He set foot on the spiral staircase.

He climbed step by step.

At first he did not notice, but with each step, the glass-like steps grew more transparent. They seemed to gradually fade away into the air. Finally, the steps themselves vanished. Kamijou continued climbing toward heaven.

No, it was not just the steps that had vanished.

“…Index?”

Kamijou called her name in surprise.

“Othinus, Fran!? Dammit!!”

There was no response. The companions he had walked with all this way were gone. No, it may not have been them that had disappeared from the world. It may have been Kamijou Touma who had disappeared.

And then he heard a voice from somewhere.

“Do you understand now?”

It was the same voice he had heard in the distance past.

Nothing about this person had changed after more than a century of fighting.

A silver and gray form stood there.

Was it supported by a trance born from a mixture of weariness and accomplishment?

Kamijou naturally called out to the staticky gathering.

“Board Chairman Aleister…?”

“Do you understand why you are here?”

Where was “here”?

The top of the Windowless Building? His life in Academy City? Being born into the world in the first place?

“If you have come all this way and still do not understand, I suppose that is fortunate.”

That “human” was destined to never have anything go the way he expected, yet he judged this to be fortunate.

“All the necessary information has been inputted. But if you still do not understand the answer, then it is the same as a disease with no subjective symptoms. If you feel no pain, you cannot resist it. I will reach the conclusion during that time.”

“I won’t argue what was good and what was evil.” Kamijou shook his head. “But your way of life is sad. If I had to choose between right and wrong, I would say the path you’ve walked is undoubtedly wrong.”

“You make it sound like I caused all of the tragedies you have seen.”

In a way, that was not inaccurate.

To erase all magic from the world after destroying the Golden cabal, this “human” had split the world in two by creating the opposing science side. He had created

Academy City to obtain the functionality he needed and, if he had controlled the opposition in the outside world, this went beyond just the one city. The science side alone could not explain this. The tragedies inside Academy City had been like sharpening one's claws and fangs and that sharpness was meant for use in battle within the outside world.

But he said more.

He was a mass of silver and gray and he was a shadow that seemed to give human form to every worldly thought. And Aleister Crowley made a definite announcement.

"You are the one that stands at the center of all this, Kamijou Touma."

"What…?"

"I lost the arrow in that conflict. And I needed to acquire it once it appeared again. So it would be no exaggeration to say I built Academy City in order to attract the Kamijou Touma who would eventually be born."

"…"

"Imagine Breaker's power is only noticeable when surrounded by people with supernatural powers. Kamijou Touma will not express his tendency toward conflict if no one needing help is within arm's reach. …And yet you *were able to make your presence perfectly known.* Why was that? Isn't it obvious? Because a stage covering western Tokyo was remade into an esper development institution that followed the perfect theory that would allow Kamijou Touma his greatest performance."

Why were esper powers seen as perfectly normal?

…Because someone had set it up that way.

Why had students been able to wield supernatural powers in the streets without anyone questioning it?

…Because someone had set it up that way.

Why were there holes in the system which allowed frequent incidents which would enrage this boy?

…Because someone had set it up that way.

Why had the adults repeatedly plotted to fulfill their selfish desires within the

city's darkness?

…Because someone had set it up that way.

What about when Kamisato Kakeru had entered the city from outside? He had not been from the science side or the magic side that someone had drawn out. He had truly come from "outside". Hadn't Kamijou Touma felt like something was terribly off about that boy? Hadn't their conversations never quite fit together and hadn't it felt like something unpleasant was shifting their words out of place? Hadn't he been angry that the other boy had continued wanting to talk about such confusing things?

But Kamijou had been wrong.

Kamisato's way had been right.

It would have been strange for them to reach a true understanding after just 5 or 10 minutes of conversation. There was an invisible barrier between people and it was normal to not truly "see" someone unless you spent a long time breaking down that barrier. It was normal to not understand someone, so wasn't Kamijou Touma's discomfort with failing to understand someone proof that he had been raised in a greenhouse that someone had created?

Having lived and lost his memories in this city, Kamijou had no knowledge outside of what was found in Academy City. This city was like his hometown. He had assumed the way things felt here was the same everywhere and understanding that was enough to have something in common with everyone in the world.

But what if that had been prepared for Kamijou Touma before Kamijou Touma had even been born?

Of course it would feel so very comfortable to him.

It was like creating a baseball school where baseball was everything so that a baseball boy could be sent there.

Meanwhile…

"If you were not that way, Academy City would not have taken this form," said Aleister's voice. "If you could be activated by different conditions, there would have been no need to construct the tragedies that make you shine."

If Kamijou Touma had been an intellectual boy who loved shogi, this city would have been filled with people sitting at shogi boards and moving shogi pieces.

If Kamijou Touma had been a sensory boy who loved cooking, this city would have been overrun with cooking battles that stimulated the senses with flavors, colors, smells, sounds, and aromas.

If Kamijou Touma had been an athletic boy who loved mountain climbing, this city would have been packed with climbing duels in which contestants climbed up the walls of the high-rise buildings.

But that boy had entrusted his life and lifestyle to his right fist.

Thus, Academy City had taken this form. So that it allowed his violence to bloom to its fullest.

“I was the one that prepared the board, lined up the pieces, and constructed the stage.”

“…”

“But, Kamijou Touma, I modelled it all after your free Thelema.”

Which one of them was the primary offender and which one was the accomplice?

…Why had the human named Kamijou Touma only had his right fist? If he had had other means of resolving things, Academy City might not have specialized in violence to this extent. He recalled the experiment in which Academy City’s #1 was made to kill 20,000 military clones, the method to summon an angel via Last Order and using Kazakiri Hyouka as the triggering mechanism, the military cyborgs of the Freshmen, the anti-Academy City Science Guardians, and the Agitate Halation project which intentionally constructed a weak person needing protection in order to mass-produce countless heroes… It had looked like it had all been started by hopeless villains and the mysterious leaders of the city, but if Kamijou Touma had chosen a slightly different path, none of those tragedies would have had to happen.

Why?

Why?

Why?

Kamijou Touma thought and thought and thought before facing forward.

And he let out a roar.

“I don’t need to ask why!! So what, you piece of shit!!!???”

He was aware he was hoping for something far too convenient here.

But.

Asking “what if” would not change anything at this point. Kamijou Touma was currently here. There was no changing that. Academy City had been in this country long before he was even born. There was no changing that either. Even if it had all been built in preparation for Kamijou Touma’s arrival, there was no way he could have stopped it since he had only arrived later.

So if he was going to argue, that was not the key point.

He had to face forward.

To ensure he avoided any further tragedy.

He did not have time to hope for what could never be. He had to think about what he could do now. He already knew exactly what he had to do. Even if that was at the end of some rails someone had laid out for him.

He had seen more than enough despair when dealing with Othinus.

So he could handle this.

The structure of the world would not crush him with its pressure.

“I can’t let you get away with this…”

“I see.”

“Whatever may have caused this and even if I share part of the blame, you clearly chose the wrong method!! So I will stop you!! Even if it means wielding *the very power that made this city the way it is*!!”

“Correcting a mistake with a mistake? If that is how you will grow, that too is fine. Your life was always doomed to fall. And it is rare for someone to understand the words they speak.”

Aleister Crowley also remained unchanged.

There was no waver in the voice of the one who had built Academy City. In fact, this may have been the voice of the villain he had created in preparation for the future.

He had a single reason.

The collisions between phases and the sparks they created. They had taken his young daughter's life for no real reason and torn his family bonds asunder…and the world was willing to accept such tragedies as no more than cruel coincidences that could not be helped. He wished to strike back against that world, so that "human" made the wickedest move available to him.

"But perhaps you are too focused on yourself to reach the proper conclusion. You are the only one allowing yourself to do this. Your position here will never change."

"…"

There was no more need to respond.

He did not need to be an embodiment of justice.

He only had to be a fighter who clenched his filthy fist.

Even if it meant breaking some rules…

Even if it meant bearing some bad karma…

He had to stop this "human".

Even if no one in the world would accept him, he had to do this.

And with that in mind, he continued up the invisible spiral staircase.

As if charging into the depthless darkness.

But a moment later…

A deafening roar blew a giant hole in this dead-end of a world and obliterated the silver and gray form.

Part 15

The A.A.A.

The machine's core was shaped like a strange magic circle and that core linked it

to someone.

It was like looking at the sun through a telescope.

The answer was right there, but carelessly looking directly at it would blind you. Only after intentionally using several thick filters to block your vision to restrict the amount of information being retrieved could she establish a normal link.

Of course, the amount of information she received was limited. She was at the center, but she could not quite grasp it. She could not shake the hesitation, like someone preparing to pull the bombing trigger based on pixelated aerial footage, but she did not need to know everything at the moment.

She knew what she had to focus on.

The One who Purifies God and Slays Demons.

It was written with different characters, but that was a boy those girls knew well.

"…I know the location."

Even if you could not crack the encrypted communication itself, you could determine the distance and direction of the tower from which it was being transmitted. This felt similar. Mikoto used the A.A.A. to locate the person to which it was linked.

The attacker who had used that curse on her may have done the same thing.

He may have sensed the girl carelessly contacting the A.A.A. and sent an invisible attack to those coordinates.

But no matter what it was, technology opened its gates equally to all.

That was an ironclad rule in the cyber wars between organized hacker groups. Cheap revenge should be avoided. Making a largescale counterattack would give the other side a chance to learn how to access or infect your system. So the standard methodology was to always consider whether the results of an attack were worth the risk it brought.

This was the same.

If the person on the other end could do it, so could she.

"The Windowless Building in the center of District 7. That's where the mysterious linked person is!! And they are extremely focused on the name Kamijou Touma!!"

“Wait, wait… Unless they’re being used as a stepping stone, that could only mean one person…”

Given the circumstances surrounding the A.A.A., it was hard to imagine that person was harmless and friendly. Even setting aside the nosebleeds caused by using the A.A.A. itself, that curse had clearly been a malicious attack from a third party.

And defying the master of the Windowless Building brought the risk of having to let go of everything they had built up inside Academy City. They were up against the Board Chairman who ran the entire city, so he would likely be able to expel or kick out a girl or two no matter how good their grades were.

Normally thinking, now was not the time to make waves.

They should be smarter about how they handled this.

But those girls had heard a certain name: Kamijou Touma.

“Let’s get started. Let’s blow a hole right through that building.”

“You never change, do you?”

Metal could be heard fitting together with ominous sounds. Even if it had been turned to scrap and dismantled by its owner, the A.A.A. was still the A.A.A.

Once it had accepted someone as its owner, it would move like a living creature when they desired it and it now attached all around the slender girl. It may have been designed to cause harm, but when it was this obedient, it actually felt quite admirable.

Shokuhou Misaki breathed an exasperated sigh.

“But are you sure this is okay? You might have learned the A.A.A.’s core is something like an antenna, but you still don’t know why you get the nosebleeds. We don’t know how it’s putting a burden on you, but it probably has something to do with your head. Rely on it at random and it might trip you up when you really need it.”

“But holding back isn’t going to help here. To be honest, I’m several laps behind and I can’t stand on the same stage as that idiot. I feel like I can only just barely catch up if I accept these risks!!”

“Like. I. Was. Saying.”

Shokuhou placed a finger on her own lips and winked.

She seemed to be joking, but she was showing her respect for the girl who had exposed her own weakness instead of hiding it.

“If I control your mind, wouldn’t we at least be able to share the burden?”

Mikoto had never even considered that.

She looked confused and answered the question with a question of her own.

“…Why would you go that far?”

“I will never tell you.”

That alone she said bluntly.

“My #5 Mental Out can’t control your mind because your #3 Railgun rejects it. But that’s because you’re subconsciously rejecting my invasion ability. Although that’s not too surprising.”

“What about it?”

“Question: is that rejection still in place? Will you still reject me if I’m trying to help you save *him*, no matter what my reasons might be?”

“I don’t know how to remove the wall.”

“It would certainly be nice if we could all control our subconscious. We’re not all expert shogi players or pro golfers, so we don’t have our own zone.”

Misaka Mikoto once more looked across Shokuhou Misaki’s body from head to toe.

And she spoke honestly.

“There’s no way we can get along.”

“I appreciate the honesty.”

“You’re extremely suspicious. You sound needlessly full of yourself despite being in the same year as me.”

“But now it’s starting to piss me off.”

“And I can’t stand that useless flesh that just annoys me to no end.”

“That has nothing to do with this!!”

Yes, no matter how hard they tried, they could never get along. They both triggered biological disgust in the other. It was like someone had gathered everything that irritated them and gave it human form. They could not just flip a switch and get along because it was an emergency.

So they had just one point in common.

Misaka Mikoto asked a question.

“Are you worried about that idiot?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

Part 16

And then two locations overlapped.

With the rumbling of the air being compressed, Misaka Mikoto once more sliced through Academy City’s blue skies while wearing the A.A.A.

She had a single destination: the center of District 7, aka the Windowless Building.

“!! That is one hell of a headache you have!”

“Now do you understand my pain?”

“But, Misaka-san, do you just have bad posture? Your shoulders are really stiff even though you don’t have much of a chest.”

“Why must you be so annoying even when you’re linked to my head!?”

It was not just Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki who were linked. The thoughts of whoever the A.A.A.’s core was linked to were mixed in as well. Although those were only fragmentary indicators that could not be converted into clear language.

But the words seemed to begin outnumbering the noise as she got closer.

She still could not see the whole picture.

But she could tell that this mystery person was strongly focused on that boy's name.

And that was enough.

"We're up against the Windowless Building which supposedly not even a nuke can destroy. What if my Railgun can't break through the wall!?"

"Well, I have heard some silly rumors that it didn't budge even after the #1 used the rotation of the earth to attack it. However…"

The other girl whispered in her mind.

She maintained the nuance of a mischievous and heated sigh.

"We don't have to hold back for the #1's sake. Let's work together and make an unprecedented record☆"

Shokuhou Misaki's power controlled people's minds, but she technically did so by controlling the miniature bits of liquid in the body.

And since adjusting the salinity could provide conductivity to that liquid, it could also be influenced by electromagnetic powers such as the Lorentz force.

On top of that, the real bottleneck with the destructive force of Mikoto's Railgun was the air resistance. If she simply launched a coin 50 meters, the frictional heat would entirely vaporize it, but that conversation of speed into heat of course caused a loss of kinetic energy.

So.

What if?

What if that Railgun was fired when that friction could be reduced or neutralized?

The Liquid Proof Railgun.

With the limits on distance and speed removed, it produced endlessly frightening destructive power.

She no longer used the frictional heat as the brakes. She reversed that way of

thinking. The slight coating of liquid on the coin's surface took away its heat and cooled it. And when that liquid explosively expanded as steam, it gave the coin even more speed. Instead of simply being carried by its initial speed, it accelerated more and more as it flew. The tiny shell gained limitless speed as it produced a thin, spear-like contrail and was absorbed by the impressive wall of the Windowless Building.

This was not possible with just any water manipulating power.

The fine control used to manipulate the liquid in the brain to control the information there was needed to place a special lattice pattern on the surface of the coin. This required precision far greater than the ablation that protected a space shuttle from the atmosphere's heat by melting in just the right way despite being nothing more than a plastic lattice.

The scenery grew distorted.

The impregnable Windowless Building was mercilessly torn into as if the coin were breaking through the wall of space itself.

She did not understand all the details.

But she could myopically make some guesses about the problem right in front of her eyes.

So that girl shouted the words that rose up from deep in her heart.

"There are lives that were saved just because you were here. There are people who were given courage just because you ran forward. So don't hesitate!! I assure you that the path you walked was the right one and that it created a great many possibilities. If something about you is rejected as wrong, then I'll open it all up and explain this to you!! So, so, so!! No matter what anyone says and no matter what logic they use against you! Stay true to your own paaaa

Does that seem strange?

But it only took the girl's words reaching his ears.

That boy once more clenched his right fist as tight as he could.

The empty vision of silver and gray was nowhere to be found. The person waiting for him now was the true Aleister Crowley.

Part 18

In truth, not even those girls may have known *which one* had done it.

"…Phew."

Shokuhou Misaki, Academy City's #5 Level 5, aka Metal Out, sighed in a distant location.

Nothing she did would allow that boy to remember what she looked like.

They could not share their memories and he would forget her no matter how much time they spent together.

Not even if she made full use of her powers as the #5.

But this was different.

It would all be remembered as Misaka Mikoto's words and Misaka Mikoto's actions.

But that meant the girl could leave her mark on him.

A vibrant sound burst out.

Shokuhou Misaki had slapped both her cheeks.

And then the girl took a new step forward after standing in place for so very long.

This time, it did not matter if it was the #3 or the #5.

The girl gave a fierce smile and spoke.

“Now, it’s time for a bit of a rampage.”

“Now, it’s time for a bit of a rampage.”

Between the Lines 2

Unlike the older age that called itself a renaissance but still required explaining the world through the existing Christian framework, the age in which natural science such as the steam engine finally swept across the world may have felt like the end of a long winter for the magicians.

The magic cabal with the Golden name was born in that age of steam and gas lights. They did not blindly accept the information written in the bible, looked instead to the ancient religions from before the bible’s creation, and attempted to learn how they had changed as they were passed down to the modern age.

Partially due to the Hermeticism they were born from, the Golden magicians tended to look to the Egyptian legends of which traces were found on the African continent across the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, the Golden cabal tended to name their temples after Egyptian gods such as Isis or Osiris.

Aleister Crowley had already been sick of the goodness and justice proclaimed by Christianity, so that had to have been a comfortable age for him.

That Golden cabal eventually broke apart due to ugly internal strife between humans, but even after the Golden cabal’s fall, that magician continued to talk about the Aeons of Isis, Osiris, and Horus. And in his later years, he released his own version of tarot which borrowed the name of Thoth.

The Thoth Tarot.

Unlike the normal GD Tarot, he mostly redid the 22 cards of the major arcana. The older tarot predicted an age when the final judgment would be given and people would continue on to the next stage, but by swapping out the images, Crowley’s version insisted that the final judgment had already occurred in 1904 and the current age was the Aeon of Horus in which Christian rule had been eliminated.

So what happened in 1904?

If you rely on his own personal view, the answer was as follows:

He contacted the holy guardian angel named Aiwass.

And the original grimoire known as the Book of the Law was released into the world.

Chapter 4: A Worthwhile Battle at Heaven's Peak – "Light".

Part 1

Kamijou Touma once more climbed to the top of the transparent spiral staircase.

He had reached the summit of the mountain.

A vast space awaited him. There was no concept of a floor or stairs here. Everything was transparent. After taking just one step into it, he was unsure where the stairs he had climbed were. No, perhaps the exit really had disappeared once he arrived.

And now that he had climbed the heavenly staircase, he was in outer space.

He had no idea how the dimensions were distorted inside and out, but the giant blue planet spread out endlessly below his feet.

"It is simple."

For the first time, he heard a physical voice instead of a staticky fake.

Kamijou Touma was not about to let any absurdity or unreasonableness surprise him now. That "human" stood in the center of that space which had nowhere to hide. He had ankle-length silver hair and wore a green surgical gown. He looked like both a man and a woman, like both an adult and a child, and like both a saint and a sinner. And he spoke as if he had been standing here for an entire century.

"A field ruled by the ley lines running through the ground. The directionality and intensity of the various forces arriving from the cardinal directions and from other heavenly bodies… The magic born on earth is bound to earth. And unfortunately, humans will fill in seas and shave down mountains to achieve their goals. Yes, the very same people who are affected by the many sparks. So I thought I might be able to achieve a ceremony worthy of my goal if I escaped the limited possibilities of the earth. I will admit I panicked somewhat when that space elevator got there ahead of me."

That was the purpose of the powerful walls, fully-enclosed environment, and rocket boosters.

And it did not matter if those conditions needed to escape the earth were destroyed. He had ignored Euclidean geometry to extend space, raise his tower in another dimension, and free himself from the bonds of the heavens.

"…Is your battle still not over?"

"It may never end. I used the life support system to prevent any traces of my life force from escaping into the outside world, but I also gave myself the difficult task of providing myself 1700 years of extra time. In other words, it is all part of the plan. No matter how many failures, defeats, losses, and setbacks I face, I can redo it all."

"Can I say something kind of mean that tramples over all that?"

"Such as?"

"…Lilith may have died before she could learn to speak, but I doubt it was *this look on your face* that she loved."

There was nothing more than that.

Kamijou never thought this was someone who could be stopped with words. He knew Aleister had invited him deep into the Windowless Building for some reason. Besides, this was Academy City, where everything was set up to be resolved with a fist. So clenching his right fist here was not leaving the rails prepared by the Board Chairman even by a millimeter.

But he did not care.

In the end, this was all Kamijou Touma had.

No matter how much he might have wished for it, he could not become a shogi player or cook in this instant. So he had to master the path he did have. Instead of worrying about the details and slamming on the brakes, he had to floor it, throw out the plans of this schemer, and grasp the results for himself. That was the only way he could accomplish anything.

"Let's do this."

"No words are necessary. We know each other better than that."

Oddly, that turn of phrase brought a smile to Kamijou's lips.

This was truly his first time meeting this “human”.

And yet Aleister’s strange statement seemed so very appropriate.

They must have been linked before he was born and they must have been enemies from the moment he was born.

No matter what explanation they gave each other, their relationship was an inseparable one.

So.

This time, words truly were not necessary.

The two of them kicked off the ground and ran forward.

Part 2

Kamijou had seen that magic battle.

And that was why he did not have to worry about being taken by surprise and killed.

The “human” named Aleister held his right hand forward. He extended his thumb and forefinger in a handgun gesture. He aimed the imaginary muzzle toward Kamijou’s belly.

And a few numbers scattered from his hand like sparks.

32, 30, 10.

“!?”

Several illusionary gunshots rang out in a row. It did not matter that the gun was flintlock. If these had been actual lead bullets, there would have been nothing Kamijou could do. But this was magic. That meant his surefire right hand would work against it. Having too perfect an image of something could be both a good thing and a bad thing.

He deflected the bullets and moved right up to Aleister.

Or he should have.

“Spray.”

“Wha-?”

Kamijou’s confused voice did not actually leave his mouth as sound.

Before it could, an unpleasant cracking sound stabbed into him from the side. He doubled over as an impact tore into his ribs. He had been running forward, but he was knocked sideways. Blood burst from his mouth as he breathed. Unable to cry out or scream, he rolled again and again across the invisible floor.

“Who are you looking at? The person standing here is the magician who has decided to live forever because he loathes the collisions between phases more than anyone else.”

“Gah…bah!? Are you saying you’ve constructed a way to gather together the unpredictable sparks and spray so you can target and fire it!?”

“Do not act so surprised by what is no more than a lightning rod. And it is limited to the magic that I launch myself. But if I had completed this spell 100 years earlier, I might have been able to show some kindness to an innocent baby.”

Kamijou could not just crawl around on the floor.

Aleister had already changed his stance. He held out his right and gently grasped the empty air. The spark-like numbers scattered: 13, 5, 32. It was like inviting fire by scraping a lighter’s flint. Kamijou had rarely ever seen the real thing, but for some reason the sharp point of a fencing sword appeared in the back of his mind.

Spiritual Tripping.

This magic forcibly drove the desired image into the viewer’s mind.

This spell gave the value of the real object to the pantomime.

(I’m going to be…stabbed!!)

Kamijou immediately tried to roll away.

But Aleister jabbed into empty air regardless.

No.

No!!

“The Blasting Rod.”

With that short warning, a pleasant sound stabbed into Kamijou’s right shoulder. A dark red hole as thick as his littler finger was opened there. An invisible blade had stabbed him. Even without an explanation, his instincts and the intense pain told him the answer.

“Ugwaaa

“When you assume the length will be extended 10 times, the Blasting Rod uses that as the basis for the 10 times amplification. Thus, the blade is extended 100 times.”

At that length, the blade could slice across this entire space. He could not pull it out. To avoid being held in place by the imaginary blade skewering him, Kamijou grabbed it with his right hand. It shattered and vanished into the ether and he regained his freedom in exchange for losing the plug keeping the wound closed.

If Aleister had intended to eliminate all magic, he must have planned to fight the Magic Gods on his own. Had he had any realistic chance of that without an exception like Kamisato Kakeru’s World Rejecter? Kamijou had his doubts, but this seemed to be the trick.

If he could not do it as a human, he would draw out the destructive power from the Magic Gods themselves.

Drawing out the power of a god and defeating a god while remaining human was the way a summoner thought.

Instead of becoming a god, he would control them and rule them.

Nothing could have been more arrogant, but that just showed how much hatred he had in his heart.

However, that methodology actually showed some promise of working against full-power Othinus. How to mentally cut down a Magic God who had absolute confidence in their power was still a major question, but this still had far better odds than using any kind of human power against them.

And…

“Do not think this is all there is.”

Aleister Crowley pointed toward the empty heavens.

“Why did I drive you on with the chain assassins and mountain devilishness which reaches for human karma and pushed you onward? Why did I have you climb the alternate-dimensional mountain of the third tree? Why did I have you pursue my past? Why did I reveal the Spiritual Tripping and the Blasting Rod? All things have a reason. If you do not know what that reason is, then it means you have not studied enough.”

“…?”

“It is all a single ceremony,” he announced.

Then the spell user spoke a powerful name.

“Come forth, Aiwass. Use the chains that bind thoughts as guidance and complete my objective.”

Immediately afterwards, that temporary universe was filled with an explosion brighter than the sun.

Part 3

In that instant, an entire city pulsated.

“Uuh…!?”

Still back in District 11, Shokuhou Misaki groaned at the eerie throbbing below her feet. Biological disgust ran down her back like the ground was covered in slugs, but the ground remained hard asphalt. If anything had changed, it was the girl herself.

Her muscles relaxed, she could not gather any strength, and her feet grew unsteady.

An unpleasant feeling different from pain rubbed at the organs inside her stomach like an invisible hand, so she doubled over and rubbed her inner thighs together.

She held her head and worked to maintain her thoughts.

(What…? My…power…)

Some juvenile halls had systems installed that prevented espers from using their powers by obstructing their concentration with the stimuli of lights, sounds, and smells, but this was different. She could only describe it in an extremely abstract way.

(…It’s being…sucked out of me…???)

Shokuhou Misaki did have a guess about this.

Not counting the chairman, the Board of Directors had only 12 members. One of those was Yakumi Hisako. When she had enacted her Agitate Halation Project, she had been served by Rensa, an esper cyborg who could use any of the Level 5s' powers. What kind of technology had she used?

Yes, she had not created the powers herself.

Hadn't she made her physical features match those of the existing Level 5s so she could remotely draw out their powers?

(So did the Board Chairman use his authority to place artificial nerves and blood vessels across the entirety of Academy City? Does that let him forcibly link to every esper raised here and gather their powers in a single place???)

It was quite the trick, but it had to be an extreme gamble on Aleister's part. After all, the heat wave that had recently attacked Academy City had been caused by a largescale microwave attack. He had won out in the end, but if things had gone just a little differently, the city's network of nerves might have been torn apart and failed to work.

And.

It was obvious where the "powers" of 80% of the city's 2.3 million people were being gathered.

"The Windowless…Building."

Shokuhou felt incredible disgust as if she were being forced into a giant biological abdominal cavity.

"But…what for…?"

Part 4

He descended.

Did this being even know what it meant to alter himself for the benefit of others? So it was not that the sunlight had weakened. Kamijou's eyeballs must have been forced to adapt. Aiwass.

The holy guardian angel that Aleister Crowley summoned using his beloved wife's body.

He had long, golden hair and radiant skin. But that skin was endlessly cold, so perhaps it should be described as a pale platinum.

He seemed beautiful, but perhaps that was because he was such a distant being.

He seemed like a jewel, but perhaps that was because he seemed so inorganic.

"A play at Thelema? You should have known from experience that someone would interfere even if you left England and built a temple."

"It can talk…?"

That alone was worthy of surprise.

Kamijou had seen angels before. For example, he had seen the one known as Gabriel a few times. But they had never made their presence known quite so smoothly. In fact, they had seemed more like machines the closer he got to them.

"I see, I see. So my voice can reach you without distortion this time. That may mean the world had recalled the truth to some extent."

Aiwass's shoulders shook in laughter, but no emotion was visible on his face.

"And is it that strange, boy?"

"What…?"

"Fuse Kazakiri was used as a model for me, but she managed to maintain her mind even in her final angelic form."

He had been created from the ground up by human hands.

From the earliest stages, he was different from a normal angel.

So…what? Was that the correct answer?

"And this is no time to be concerned with such trivial matters."

Something impossible happened.

The angel smiled.

This was the look of someone who had stumbled across a new hobby while bored out of their mind.

“At the moment, I am your natural enemy.”

It exploded.

What did? Before Kamijou’s mind could catch up, he swung his fist forward and his right arm was bent at an odd angle from the shoulder. Not even the intense pain could keep up. Then *something invisible* burst from his shoulder and Aiwass grabbed it in his hand while still smiling.

“Ha ha!! It seems to have grown some, but it still has a long way to go. And its purity leaves much to be desired. Aleister, you’ve been making detours, haven’t you!?”

“You talk too much.”

“Very well.”

It happened in the span of a breath. It was just like with Magic God Othinus back in Baggage City. Aiwass squeezed his hand and easily crushed whatever-it-was to death.

“Ah…gah!?”

The pain finally caught up.

Kamijou staggered back while holding his wobbling right shoulder.

“Ignorance truly is a frightening thing,” said Aiwass. “Are you really entrusting your life to three-dimensional distance in a miniature garden where Euclid never applied in the first place?”

Something was coming.

Kamijou clenched his teeth, grabbed his destroyed shoulder, and mustered all of his strength to force the dislocated joint back into place.

As soon as he swung his arm, his body somersaulted backwards. He had just forced his shoulder back into the socket in exchange for so much pain that his vision dimmed, but the joint was dislocated again just a few seconds later.

“Ighgghghghgh! Ghgghghghghghghgghh!?”

(Dammit!! I blocked it, but I still have no idea what happened!!)

If he could at least learn what this attack was in exchange for the damage, he could come up with a plan concerning which way to dodge. But with no results, he could only continue to block the attack.

This was the great treasure built up in order to overpower all of the Magic Gods, including full-power Othinus. That meant this battle would be just as…no, more hellish than that battle.

And Aiwass was not the only one here.

Aleister made an announcement as if whispering.

“The Blasting Rod.”

That support spell would amplify an attack’s power to 10 times what the target thought it would be.

It was now a solid wall.

Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass had been amplified 10 times.

Kamijou did not even have time to fix his dislocated shoulder. He grabbed his unreliably dangling right wrist with his left hand and forcibly pulled it forward just in time for the direct clash to hit.

His feet rose from the floor.

His body flew through the air and his back slammed into a colorless and invisible wall.

“G…bh!?
Bwaaa

"…Pant…pant…"

Was it a hand or a wing?

It was too large to imagine the overall form. And even after it moved away, Kamijou could not move for a while. He was pinned to the wall and could not even collapse to the floor. No, he even considered the possibility that he was squished to the wall like a crushed frog.

"That's just like a transformation," said Aiwass. "How childish."

"If I was not, I would not have continued falling for more than a century."

"True enough, I suppose. If you had any sense, you would have given up long ago and your soul would have withered away."

What could he do?

How could he punch them?

Even when Kamijou turned his thoughts inward to escape the pain before his eyes, he could not find an answer.

So when he moved, it was mostly on reflex.

He grabbed his right shoulder with his left hand and forced the joint back in place.

Having returned to his normal scale, Aiwass scoffed at the intent to continue fighting.

And the angel almost seemed to be enjoying himself.

"You're quite the hero, aren't you? *Are you that intent on refusing to let Aleister Crowley fall on his own?* Yes, I can see why you were chosen."

"…?"

"Imagine Breaker chose you. Because no matter how much this man longed for it, he only ever met failure and setbacks."

Kamijou did not have time to search for the true meaning of those words.

The sun attacked him once more.

Part 5

In that moment, a horrible chill ran down the back of 15cm Fairy Othinus who had lost her usual spot.

“Touma, Touma! Where are you!?”

She looked in an odd direction as she listened to the white nun continue to shout the boy’s name *after he vanished into thin air while partway up the large spiral staircase.*

“Aiwass… That name is appearing here?”

“What?” asked Fran who picked Othinus up so she would not be trampled underfoot.

The sole surviving Magic God breathed from her nose.

“Tch!!”

The spiral staircase provided much greater footing. That eliminated the risk of falling, but it also allowed the gear and handcuff rings to become a threat once more as they appeared around Maika. Thanks to that, Tsuchimikado was forced to constantly fight back. The rainbow chain skeleton and transparent flesh and blood could not be defeated without Imagine Breaker, so he was continually beating them back barehanded. Fran seemed to move slowly, but she had joined the fight as the only one who could voluntarily use magic without any risk.

“Aleister had always used the term ‘scientific’ in a positive way. He would say anything, be it spiritual or physical, was scientific as long as it was beautifully ordered and could be explained causally.”

Othinus was a big deal herself for continuing to speak with no change of tone with all this going on.

“And the peak of that theory was Aiwass. That name doesn’t come from anywhere. It doesn’t belong to any religious category. …And this world is formed from the multiple magic side phases that have been placed on top of the physical laws.” She put her hands on her hips and looked to the mountain devilishness. “Aiwass is *the angel of the bottommost layer…that is, of the world of pure physical laws.* That is why he is Aleister’s greatest treasure. If he establishes a means of controlling Aiwass and uses that tremendous power to destroy all of the filters

other than Aiwass, only a magicless world will remain."

"? ???"

The hoodie bikini girl was part of the magic side, but not even she seemed to understand.

The one who came to a stop was Index.

"Aiwass? But if that appears here while living up to the theoretical values…"

"Yes, this would have been constructed in order to oppose Magic Gods such as myself. That human doesn't stand a chance of winning in a straight fight."

Someone gulped.

But surprisingly, the understander did not look all that frightened.

Othinus continued:

"Every man and every woman is a star."

"Aleister Crowley?"

"Yes. It's really only explaining that nothing in this world is meaningless and all things are intertwined. Although it adds that the individual people have not awoken to what is right so the current gears are rusted and jammed."

"Hm? Hmm??? What does that mean?"

"You don't understand?"

Othinus was a god of magic, war, and deception.

If there was even the smallest chance of victory, she would not give up.

"Then let's change how we look at this. What happens if we think about it in reverse?"

Part 6

Misaka Mikoto flew around the Windowless Building with the A.A.A. attached all across her body. She too was affected by the ominously throbbing city.

Her connection was poor.

Her control of her own powers was unstable and her flight had grown unsteady.

Even so, she gave a roar.

She seemed to be throwing her words toward the other girl who was not here.

“Bear with it! Shokuhou!!”

“!? I’m…trying!!”

What they had to do had not changed.

They did not have any details about what the master of the Windowless Building was plotting. The noise was so bad that she could not read the thoughts of the person she was supposedly linked to through the A.A.A. But she only had to think about it. What was the most obvious choice that would cause his pre-established harmony to crumble away? He was holed up in the world’s strongest fortress. So if she was to do anything, shouldn’t she tear away that armor and strip him bare?

She did not have to know how it ended.

She only had to stand on that stage and play a role in influencing the situation.

So…

“Here goes!!!!!”

“Here goes!!!!!”

Sound was blown away.

The extraordinary attack of the Liquid Proof Railgun was released and stabbed randomly into the side of the Windowless Building. It was all to tear down that stronghold and push things even a millimeter away from the ideal envisioned in the Board Chairman’s head.

This would not defeat him.

Even after using every last ounce of effort and shedding tears of blood, this would not deliver a finishing blow.

“So what?”

“I’m sick of waiting.”

“If I was going to lose heart and give up here…”

“…I wouldn’t have stood up in the first place!!”

Part 7

No matter what.

There was simply no way that Kamijou Touma could dodge the attack launched by Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass. This was a wide open space with nothing to hide behind. The blue planet was visible below and it was the ultimate away game prepared by Aleister.

But the boy did not die.

He reflexively squeezed his eyes shut when a deafening roar exploded nearby, but the pain and impact never arrived.

Once he slowly pried his convulsing eyelids back open, Kamijou regained his sense of sight.

And he saw something in front of him.

It was Mina Mathers.

With her mourning clothes, cat ears, and tail, the Black Cat Witch looked horribly out of place as she stood in the way.

“What…?”

The first one to voice surprise was Aleister Crowley who had supposedly prepared all of this.

The witch held a silver palette knife. It looked useless as far as attack power was concerned, but it was the ultimate source which had drawn, colored, and constructed the many cards and ceremonial tools used by the Golden cabal.

Mina Mathers' weapon was art. Perhaps that made her like Prometheus who had given fire to humanity. Her skill had given concrete form to the uncertain inspiration held by so many magicians.

The rainbow line drawn in space by the palette knife was her everything.

"Was this really so far beyond your expectations?"

The palette knife gradually distorted, bent, and lost its form, but it still continued to hold back Aiwass's attack.

"Out of everyone from the Golden age, you chose me as your host. You could have chosen your wife Rose or your daughter Lilith, but you chose me, Mina Mathers. The wife of your bitter enemy is an extremely unstable position. So I can guess that *you predicted this failure and some part of your heart hoped that I would take Kamijou Touma's side.*"

"What?"

The confusion finally reached Kamijou.

He clenched his right fist again and his blank mind could not understand any of this.

“Why did you appear here? Weren’t you a part of those illusions!? Huh, but didn’t my left hand touch you…and your breast was really soft…huh!?”

“Instead of giving into confusion, please go over the information one piece at a time. First, a lifeless illusion cannot use magic. All magic must be powered by refined magic power and that requires a life force at its base.”

“I see,” spat out Aiwass in the tone of someone enjoying an accident. “Aleister, it would seem you have failed yet again.”

Then what was this?

She was not a created illusion. But it was unthinkable for the real human Mina Mathers to appear here. After all, she would have lost to Aleister in a magic battle long ago and she would have vanished into the shadows of history. Then who was this who had used magic and saved Kamijou?

“You most likely already know the answer. At least, you should now that you have seen so much of Aleister Crowley.”

“?”

“I am the Reading Thoth 78 built into the Windowless Building. I am no more than a parallel processing device made to prove whether or not Administrator Aleister Crowley’s adjustments to his plan are correct or not.”

Kamijou Touma was not the one to gasp.

It was Aleister and this likely meant he had finally arrived at the answer.

“The core of my thoughts is made up of the 78 tarot cards constructed by my administrator himself. But that can also be seen as sorting them all into a single book.”

In other words…

The being who borrowed the form of the Black Cat Witch gave the answer.

“I am also an original grimoire named the Thoth Tarot. Even if I cannot refine my own magic power as a living being can, the forbidden writings absorb power from my surroundings to automatically use magic for self-defense.”

A few rumbling noises burst out.

The rainbow art deflected the heavenly tyranny.

The distorted palette knife and holy guardian angel's wings collided, but the Black Cat Witch was still not defeated.

They were both Aleister Crowley's greatest masterpieces.

No…

"The Thoth Tarot is an alternative sorting derived from the official GD model and it contains the essence of Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass within it. The 20th card of the Major Arcana is named the Aeon. That card originally symbolized the final judgment, but you changed the arcana because you decided that judgment had already occurred when you contacted Aiwass in 1904. Meaning…"

"Ha ha! This is just like Rensa. Does that grimoire contain text that can draw power from me!?"

That was why she was capable of striking back.

Even if hers was only borrowed, both sides were wielding Aiwass's power.

And the validity of the fundamental theory had already been proven by Aleister himself by using an esper cyborg to draw power out of the 7 Level 5s.

"But borrowed power is no more than that," warned Aiwass. "It will not last forever."

"I do not mind. Even as he stands and watches here, Aleister Crowley is constantly falling. I only need to buy enough time for the conclusion to arrive."

Was there more?

Kamijou wondered that, but that was the wrong question.

Why was the Black Cat Witch…no, the Thoth Tarot turning on Aleister, her master?

"Every man and every woman is a star." The mourning clothes and cat-ears lady whispered through her veil. "My administrator's ideology states that no one is unnecessary to the world so long as they behave as they should, but that also means that the entire music box will stop playing if even a single gear is missing. And, Aleister, you are already watching your house of cards crumble."

A low rumbling reached them.

But the source was far away. This was the sound of destruction in some other

place.

Aleister shouted the answer.

“An attack from outside… The A.A.A.’s usurper!?”

“With this, it will all collapse. I described it as a house of cards. Even slight damage will cause the whole to topple. Your failure will not stop at just one. Once it begins, it will trigger a chain reaction as more and more of your plan collapses. Just like you once lost the Temple of Thelema due to a single accident.”

Yes.

“Why did this innocent boy come here?”

The question naturally had an answer.

Namely…

“To find a way to safely remove the magic sword stabbed into Tsuchimikado Maika. If you used *it all* to ensure the stability of Aiwass’s summoning, then doesn’t that seem like an important risk concerning the collapse of your plan?”

Part 8

The answer had been in front of their eyes the entire time.

Othinus spoke while still held in Fran’s hands.

“Expand your perception.”

This was a mysterious space where Euclidean geometry did not apply. But that condition had partially collapsed at the moment.

An attack from outside had cracked the wall, so the space was no longer enclosed like it was meant to be. In an amusement park’s house of mirrors, breaking just one of the many mirrors would destroy its perfection.

“Focus on the scenery outside of the broken wall and use that to build up your picture of the whole. Yes, yes. Damn, we should have done this in the first place

instead of letting those rainbow chains distract us. We *entered* the building through the giant hole created by the damage to the rocket boosters!!"

Once Fran looked at the world from the proper focal point, the fantastical scene was entirely gone. The entire scene was swept away like clearing fog and she saw a space of steel and rare metals that was lined with computers the size of industrial refrigerators and had countless thick cables crawling along the floor.

"What…is this…?"

"We revealed the temple, but Touma didn't come back!!"

"He went in too deep. If we're going to have a chance to rescue him, we need to start by destroying the perfection of Aleister Crowley's structure."

What did they need to do?

Why had they risked so much to enter the Windowless Building?

"Pull out everything in storage. If there's a spell for safely removing the sword in this girl's chest, that will be our greatest weapon. Every man and every woman is a star. If he used everything for this, then losing even one of the gears means to lose the entire world. So even if we're here, we're still fighting alongside Kamijou Touma."

Pulling out the data was a task for Tsuchimikado and Fran who were good with machines.

Data like this would normally have been protected by strange encryption or even stored in a format different from any known programming language, but they were surprised to find plain text that anyone could read.

Almost as if *someone* had prepared it there for them.

"Gh!?"

"Fran-chan, wait! Don't look at that!!"

The hoodie bikini girl groaned and Tsuchimikado wrinkled his brow behind his sunglasses.

This was the infection of an original grimoire's toxin.

Only one of them could fight that.

“It’s not so much the foundational theories of Magick as it is a dictionary or correspondence chart of symbols and numbers. Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, the Golden cabal…no, this goes beyond that. Liber 777 or the manuscript released into the world before that. Is it just scribbled out notes? The 7 stars of Olympus, a conversion between the Eastern I Ching and the Western 4 great elements, unique tarot cards, Egyptian gods, how to create symbolic weapons… Oh, I see. A virginal magic sword!! Yes, this should work.”

But who was it that had drawn out all that knowledge? Grimoire Library Index. But *he* would have known that she lived in Academy City and had entered the Windowless Building. Which meant…

“It wasn’t Aleister,” said Othinus. “He does not care if he succeeds or fails. So he will cast the die for real. It isn’t like him to intentionally self-destruct by showing off how to defeat him.”

Then who?

The information at hand was not enough to find the answer, but there was one thing they could say. This too must have been something Aleister Crowley had not expected.

And Othinus spoke calmly to Tsuchimikado as he dealt with the rainbow chain beasts that glowed like LED suits or mountain devilishness that drew out human karma.

“Hey, bloody Onmyouji. You’re up.”

“…Seriously? You don’t hold back. There’s a girl right there who can use magic without any side effects.”

“You’re trading roles. Fran can handle the chain beasts. Yes, and don’t depend on the fact that the coloration change will send her magic out of control. If we fail, that sword made from a combination of multiple meanings will shatter and a life will be lost.”

“Well, I should be able to fight just fine as long as I use spells that don’t involve a coloration.”

The hoodie bikini girl and Tsuchimikado Motoharu stood back to back and then spun around.

They changed which way they were facing as if they were passing each other in a revolving door.

“I have no reason to feel concern for any human besides my understander.” The 15cm god sighed. “It may not be logical. Or efficient. …But don’t give someone else the job of saving your family. Got that?”

“Tch.”

The sunglasses boy’s shoulders relaxed.

And he spoke.

“Fine then. It’s time for Onii-chan to show off just how cool he is.”

Part 9

Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass had looked so perfect, but an impurity had clearly entered him. Something ran through him like static and his outline wavered unpredictably. A small triangular prism could be seen in the center of his head.

“Heh heh.”

But he seemed to be enjoying it.

Something in this world could still harm him. That should have been a bad thing for him, but he seemed to celebrate it.

“So it ends in failure this time too. Honestly, the world looks so simple, but it is a surprisingly large place. Isn’t that right, Aleister?”

That was as far as he got.

Like an unreliable candle being blown out, the supposedly strongest Aiwass entirely vanished.

At the same time, the Thoth Tarot, which was using the Black Cat Witch’s appearance, lost her greatest power since she had been borrowing it from him.

“Too great an attraction can distort even the flow of one’s life force. But that ends now. A bullet or even a fist can reach you now.”

And hadn’t Mina Mathers said she only had to buy enough time for the

conclusion to arrive?

“Go get him, innocent boy.”

So.

The one who stepped forward in the very, very end was the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere.

The “human” here had sworn he would strike back against god in the very, very beginning and he had even betrayed the magic he believed in and relied on, but now his lips clearly moved.

“I will wipe clean this false scenery covered by the countless colored glasses of the phases.”

Aleister Crowley had experienced failure countless times. Even if he faced a crisis, his stance would never change.

“I will destroy all of the phases and correct this world that manipulates people without their knowledge! This goes beyond Lilith’s death! I will remake this world which buries those tragedies by saying they can’t be helped!! And to do that…to do that, I will…!!!!!!”

“Did you never stop to think that all that formless stuff might sometimes protect people’s happiness?”

This may not have been something Kamijou Touma was meant to say.

He was a resident of the science side and this city tended to interpret legends and religions from a scientific perspective, so this argument may have been out of place coming from him.

But who was it that had placed the division between the magic side and science side? And what had he been trying to accomplish by dividing the world in two?

That was obvious.

Aleister Crowley had intentionally restricted people’s freedom of thought for his own ends. Without any of them noticing, he had set up the entire world to criticize the thing he hated. Academy City’s way of thinking was formed by the rules that Aleister had decided on, so Kamijou was not obligated to follow them. He needed to spread the wings of imagination further than that.

“The collisions between phases bring about both meetings and partings, right? It

can also become a power that supports your back when you need it most, right? Can't you think of it as the thing that lets you regain your strength and stand back up that one last time!?"

"Nonsense… Are you going to applaud the meaninglessly biased world for giving you bits of fortune that do not even amount to scraps? Even when you know there are some who are trampled underfoot by it!?"

"Then!!"

Kamijou Touma had no idea what was right.

So he asked a question of the person who believed he was 100% right.

"*What if I said innocent Lilith's soul arrived safely in heaven and she's smiling there now!!* Are you going to trample on and unconditionally reject that belief!?"

There was a definite gasp.

He had lost his absolute correctness. So Kamijou Touma continued while stepping forward.

"Tell me, rejecter of the mystical. What happened to Lilith afterwards!? Do you just plug in all the scientific equations and say she rotted below the dirt as a mass of protein that's life functions had stopped!? Declining times when you have nothing to rely on and an age of equal misfortune can't be easy. But is it equal and fair to tell a dying child to crawl back up on her own? Even if fortune and misfortune are being manipulated by an outside force, can't we fill that gap if everyone shares their good fortune with those in need!? Well!!!???"

This was what the avenger had lacked.

He could be cold-hearted. He did not need to have great courage. But if he had believed that the vanished life was smiling in heaven, he most likely would not have had to resort to revenge.

He would not have had to destroy the Golden cabal.

He would not have had to kill his former friends and teachers.

…He may have seen no reason for those dreadful acts and been forgiven at some point.

"That's all make-believe."

“Perhaps,” admitted Kamijou.

“My thoughts are not so narrow that they can be shaken by something so uncertain!!”

“But I have to believe it’s true!! *I have to believe that your daughter went to heaven!!* I have to believe that it’s wrong if people aren’t rewarded in the afterlife if they didn’t do anything bad!! I don’t know what a soul is. I can’t explain where exactly heaven is. But I have to believe that it exists and that it mustn’t be taken away by someone on the outside! And that those of us left here have to treat those lives with respect!! This alone I can’t let anyone deny. Aleister Crowley, even if you’re her father, I won’t let you deny this!!”

There was no more need for words.

32, 30, 10. Aleister formed a handgun with his right hand and Kamijou Touma’s right hand deflected the imaginary bullet. Then the magician’s lips uttered a spell: the Blasting Rod. But before its power could take effect, the Black Cat Witch lightly threw her palette knife.

It stabbed into something in the empty air and a twisted silver staff fell to the invisible floor.

“Here we have someone who cast aside his own beliefs to show concern for Lilith while he stays true to himself using only his fist. So why is the father fleeing to petty tricks out of fear of the answer?”

Kamijou Touma finally arrived right in front of Aleister.

But the Board Chairman was not out of ammunition yet. While it was limited to the magic he used, he could wield a power similar to the sparks or spray created from the colliding phases and he could direct it toward a target.

This was the same sort of power that had driven his beloved daughter to her death. It was a contradictory hidden technique covered in the same sin as those he so hated.

What did it feel like to have that as his only option for a final trump card?

Aleister Crowley was constantly failing.

That was already well established, but Kamijou could not help but sense the irony of fate here.

And Kamijou Touma never did think about dodging.

This was nothing as clean as a cross counter.

Both of their attacks stabbed mercilessly into the other's body.

Kamijou Touma's ribs cried out in protest. The invisible attack that dug into his side worked at destroying his flesh.

Meanwhile, his fist definitely buried itself in the Board Chairman's face. He could feel something small breaking in that face.

Did it last an instant or an eternity?

After a short silence, movement returned.

"Why…?"

First, a voice was heard.

This magician supposedly knew everything there was to know about the world, yet he asked a simple question. It was so simple that it was hard to know what he meant by it.

But Kamijou Touma gave his answer.

"There's only one reason you lost: At some point, you stopped standing on the side that protected the sanctity of Lilith's soul."

That was all.

Aleister Crowley's body crumbled straight down.

Epilogue: Bursting Malice – Devil_in_Evil.

It was all over.

When Kamijou gasped for breath and looked around, he found he was no longer in outer space. He was in an artificial space full of crude machines which was large but felt cramped.

And the Black Cat Witch smiled thinly beyond her veil.

After a quiet bow, she too slowly vanished.

The Windowless Building had been destroyed and its master had stepped down from the stage. Had she known this would happen?

“Touma!!”

He heard a voice from surprisingly close by.

He looked over in surprise and saw Index there.

“What? Where were you all this time?”

“That’s my line!! Honestly, why did you have to go so deep inside!?”

“? ???”

Kamijou did not know what exactly had happened, but he was glad they were together again.

As for Tsuchimikado…

“Aleister was…knocked out? I can’t believe it.”

“You’re pretty damn bloody, you know?”

“I risked my life to save my sister.”

His tone made it clear that was not a joke. He pointed his thumb back over his shoulder to show Kamijou where the condensed shadow sword was no longer in Tsuchimikado Maika’s flat chest.

Kamijou looked back over at the collapsed magician.

“I hope this will rid him of whatever was possessing him, but he was an exceptional case since he assumed defeat and failure. Just to be sure, it might be a good idea to have you and Fran meet up with the Anglicans outside the city. To see what’s going on here.”

The impregnable Windowless Building was in ruins. Kamijou saw a middle school girl wearing a bulky mass of steel fly by outside.

At any rate, this was over for the time being.

And so they decided to search for some kind of exit.

But just before they could, a far too light sound filled that space.

Where did it come from?

Kamijou Touma, Index, Othinus, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Karasuma Fran, and Tsuchimikado Maika all turned toward it.

It came from the “human” named Aleister Crowley.

He lay collapsed on his back, but a thick blade appeared far too suddenly and mercilessly pierced the left side of his chest.

The grimoire library spoke the name of that deadly weapon.

“The Sword of Damocles…?”

Immediately, light exploded from the wound and gravity seemed to vanish for Kamijou’s group.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm, hmmm☆”

Now that everyone was gone, someone appeared as if to view the magician whose heart had been skewered.

She had incredibly long blonde hair.

She wore beige vestments.

She was the Anglican Archbishop who had snuck in while disguised as part of the

recovery team positioned outside the city to assist with Karasuma Fran's covert mission.

She was Lola Stuart.

"This sword cautions the powerful who lack resolve. Originally, the legend was recreated as a test of courage for royalty and nobility to prove their worth, but if you choose the right target, you end up with this. A decent plan for the sword meant to fall on you, don't you think?"

No, not everyone else was gone.

The man who had supposedly lost his heart opened his eyes.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Checkmate," she simply said. "You seem to be just barely staying conscious with the blood remaining in your veins, but as the blood flow to your brain stagnates, it will only take a few minutes for your thoughts to grow muddy and ultimately stop altogether. At this point, I doubt you can even refine your life force into magic power. Nor can you maintain a quasi-immortal state by distorting the circulation of your life force using the attraction of an extremely great being like Westcott did."

"…"

"No one knows who Academy City's Board Chairman is. No one will notice if the individual closed up in the Windowless Building changes. I will make good use of what you have built up: the science side. Half of the world. Once I have that, the power balance with the Roman Catholic Church and Russian Orthodox Church will be decisively overturned."

The magic side and the science side.

And the magic side had its own internal power struggles.

…Just how ugly was the human world? That was all Aleister Crowley could think. This woman did not even know why he had split the world in two. He almost smiled at the fact that she was several steps behind a mere high school boy.

But then the holy woman said something the magician did not expect.

"Hey, Aleister. Didn't you find it odd?"

"Find…what odd?"

"My name. My. Name."

Aleister was unsure what she meant, so the woman wagged her slender finger.

"You can whine about your daughter all you want, but aren't you being a tad coldhearted? Aleister, I know you're well aware you were far from the sort of moral man who would wed only the one wife throughout his life. You married multiple times and you also had mistresses. *And so Lilith was not your only daughter.* Hm? Well? Do you still not recognize my name???"

"It…can't be."

"You look like you can't figure out how you never remembered it before now. Now, one more thing. It's time for a review. You absolutely detested Mathers. Not only was he an excellent magician, but he also called himself a highlander and hoped to restore an old royal house. So much so that it troubled the other cabal members. Now. Then. Which royal house was that?""

"…*The House of Stuart…* No, it can't be, no!!"

"Well, reflecting his desires when choosing a temporary name was more of a special service for him. You seem to have thought you summoned me at a later date, but I was actually already summoned before that."

Only one thing came to mind here.

Memories of the desert came flooding back.

After discovering an abyss which could not be passed even when binding the tarot cards with a path, he had summoned a demon to cross that abyss, but he had realized his own failure and commanded it to leave.

In a way, that name was as meaningful as Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass's and perhaps even more so.

"…Coron…zon…?"

"I was given just the one command from Mathers: Pretend I had been summoned by you, Aleister Crowley, and then guide you to ruin. I hid within a mountain of papyrus to travel from northern Africa to England and manipulated the powerful historical side of the nation more than the mystical side, but while I was granting people's wishes for fun, I was bound by a contract. Aleister, he is often overshadowed by you, but Mathers was quite skilled."

"It" laughed with a mocking tone.

But did “it” really point to the woman before his eyes?

“And that command did not vanish even after his death, so here I am still obediently following it. Well, I failed to hijack your body, so I ended up choosing a different avatar.”

Her family name of Stuart was borrowed from the true summoner’s obsession.

Then what about the first name?

Where had that come from?

“Yes, yes. Poor Lola. The second daughter bound by the threads of fate to a failure of a madman.”

“Damn you…”

The blonde hair bound behind her head was so long that it fell to her hips even when folded over. Once she undid the pure gold clasp, it spread out like a glowing carpet and wriggled behind Lola’s back.

The devil resides in women’s hair.

This seemed to follow that old witch tradition.

A giant and sinister demonic face appeared in the golden waterfall like a tattoo covering her entire back.

She wrapped her arms tightly around the bewitching body contained inside the beige vestments and her back shook profanely as she laughed in mockery.

This was the face a father least wanted to see.

It was also the face that a beloved daughter would least have wanted him to see.

And as if to divulge it all…

“She normally insulted you constantly, but in the end she was tearfully pleading for you: *Father! Father!! Help me, father!!!!!!*”

“Damn yooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuu

From the beginning, Aleister Crowley's wish would never be granted.

Because he had condemned himself to that fate.

A sticky sound rang out.

The sound moved inside the stabbed magician and the being known as Coronzon had a new avatar. The hole in the chest did not vanish, but that was a convenient location. As long as no one touched it from above the clothing, no one would notice it was there. And he stayed holed up in his fortress anyway, so there was little chance of that happening.

He remained on his back and his sprawled out silver hair began moving on its own. It was not visible because he was lying on top of it, but there was likely a demonic face in that hair.

“Heh heh.”

And.

This time, there truly was no one else in this cold space, so the demon contained in a beautiful woman laughed.

“Heh heh heh!! Hah hah!! Hee hee!! Ha ha ha

“You knew!? Word really does reach you fast!!”

“…Huh?”

“A largescale attack is underway in Canada, Australia, and the other British Commonwealth nations! Britain itself has taken some damage. The knights are currently holding it back, but the outskirts of London have already fallen!! They say if the enemy constructs a base here, it could become a long-term battle!!”

“W-wait, what, hold on! What exactly is happening over here!?”

“I repeat: simultaneous largescale attacks are underway in the British Commonwe- bgyuh!?”

The transmission ended.

No, someone else began speaking over the communication spell.

“…Do you still not understand?”

It was an impossible voice.

But Lola Stuart did not look toward the communication spell or toward the empty shell of an avatar pinned to the floor. She looked in a different direction.

Someone stood where no one had been before.

Her long, long blonde hair began to wickedly writhe once more.

“…The Thoth Tarot? A grimoire that borrows people’s forms?”

“Is that what you think, or what you hope?”

There was not just one person there.

There was a man. There was a woman. There was an adult. There was a child. There was a saint. There was a sinner.

Aleister’s generic appearance had left those who saw him with a variety of impressions, but this very strange scene looked like each of those different faces had been isolated and brought to life.

“My soul shined with many colors.”

What was this?

Lola Stuart's cheeks twitched as she made some guesses.

"That is because I had always sealed many different possibilities within my single body. But once I released multiple versions of myself into the world, it became apparent they would only clash and I could not expect them to work together. That is why I had to bind myself and contain every version of myself to a single coordinate. So as usual, I did not think it through and regretted my actions."

The group spoke.

"Although when I punished Fiamma of the Right and other such times, a momentarily branched-off alternative version of myself would have been observable. I appear in an instant and disappear in an instant. And not through the use of teleportation. Yes, did you never think it could be explained using the obsolete concept of faxing?"

"Wait a second. You mean…?"

"This was bound to happen from the moment I left the life support device to resolve the Karasuma Fran and Kihara Yuiitsu problems. Even if Kamijou Touma and Lola Stuart had not appeared, I would have branched out almost endlessly. This will create every version of me born from the various 'ifs'."

Smiles surrounded her.

And they undoubtedly belonged to the "human" named Aleister Crowley.

"If the number calculated out by the former Tree Diagram and proven by the Reading Thoth 78 is accurate, the number of options available to me and the number of branches to which those would lead are 1,083,092,867. In other words, that many Aleister Crowleys exist as those many possibilities. You have witnessed that moment. Yes, no matter what you do now, you have *only* witnessed it. As if you are watching fireworks being launched from this single spot."

"…"

"Now, now. How many times does it have to be said? Aleister Crowley does not care if he succeeds or fails. If I succeed, that's wonderful. If I fail, I use that to continue forward. That is the plan based on my Thelema. So why did you relax just because you had won? It is true I did not arrive at the truth of Lola and Coronzon. You can even say I failed from the moment I had to once more dirty my hands with that loathsome magic. *But did you really think you could change the trend I had created just because I did not know the answer and you outwitted*

me???"

"……
……!?"

A wet sound burst out.

But even though one of him was crushed and killed, the writhing whole declared war all the same.

"My plan has failed again. I will give you the alternatively-shaped temple known as Academy City."

"My plan has failed again. I will give you the alternatively-shaped temple known as Academy City."

"My plan has failed again. I will give you the alternatively-shaped temple known as Academy City."

He said it far too readily.

And he overturned everything.

"And instead, I believe I will take your toy: all of the nations belonging to the British Commonwealth…including the United Kingdom itself."

"And instead, I believe I will take your toy: all of the nations belonging to the British Commonwealth…including the United Kingdom itself."

"And instead, I believe I will take your toy: all of the nations belonging to the British Commonwealth…including the United Kingdom itself."

Kamijou Touma was thrown out into the empty air.

It took him a while to realize he had been tossed out through the damaged portion of the Windowless Building's wall.

Even after he began to fall, he did not immediately slam into the ground.

Mikoto was flying through the air in the A.A.A. and collecting a few people from the air. But she could not arrive in time for the very last one: Kamijou.

He did not even have time to scream.

But his life was not crushed and lost.

Even though Mikoto's hand did not reach him, something did suddenly interrupt his fall.

"Gweh!?"

He felt intense resistance in his neck. Only a little later did he realize the tip of some kind of stick had caught on the back of his collar at several dozen meters above the ground.

He heard a voice like a small bell.

"Do not swing your right hand at random. Destroy the broom now and I will have trouble ensuring either of our lives."

"…Wha-?"

The voice was not at all similar.

This one definitely belonged to a girl of middle or high school age.

"The city's core functions have been taken, but your Imagine Breaker and the #1 Accelerator are needed to contact Aiwass's core. We will also receive backup from Aneri, the version of the Reading Thoth 78, aka Mina Mathers, which I had spread throughout the city after lowering it to a consumer level. Lola…no, Coronzon seems to think she has reached checkmate, but there are plenty of holes in her encirclement."

However, a completely different name appeared in the back of Kamijou Touma's mind.

Yes, the name of that magician.

"Allow me to introduce myself again."

The girl smiled.

And that nemesis spoke like they were old acquaintances.

"I am Aleister Crowley. Or, one of his many possibilities."

Afterword

If you've been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This will be the 18th volume since New Testament began. After biding his time, it's Aleister Crowley's time to shine. But instead of the straightforward power of a Magic God, I focused on the strength he had built up "as a human". After all, he's the leader of Academy City, so of course he'll have some largescale gimmicks and I wanted to build up the one large stage that has been present throughout the series.

Crowley is treated very differently depending on the book you are reading and some of them highlighted the more mischievous (can you really call it that?) stories introduced in this novel. People having a variety of facets depending on what part of them you look at is an important pillar of thought in this series, but I think Crowley is the greatest example of that.

Whether he succeeds or fails, the result is always pointed in a single direction. Without letting his surface emotions get the better of him, he is always looking to his Thelema, the will hidden deep in his soul. Simply put, whether he wins or loses, his emotions remain unmoved and he continues calmly toward his goal at the exact same speed. That makes him a truly cruel enemy for a battle series and I also wanted to show the strength that symbolizes his life of setbacks. But what did you think?

…The Battle of Blythe Road that appeared in this book was an internal conflict in which the leaders of the world's largest magic cabal fought for supremacy in the foggy city of London. It sounds full of romance when you look at that explanation, but the actual events and result were apparently a complete mess, so I changed things a bit to push it more toward the fictional side. (Not to mention that the "real" magic they used was not the kind that let them shoot fire or fly around on a broom.) I thought it would be best to shift the timeline and make the daughter the cause. If you're interested, it might be fun to look into the details for yourself, but I will say you might feel disillusioned after learning about that struggle for power.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san, to my editors Miki-san and Anan-san, and to Itou Tateki who I had work hard creating the overall image of the stage this time. With the stage and the enemies, I think there were a lot of fairly amorphous things in this one. That must have been extremely difficult to illustrate. Thank you for sticking with me.

And I give my thanks to the readers. In a way, this volume returned to the basics and I tried to give it a structure that summed everything up with a battle in the end. I hope you enjoyed it.

As reference material for the magic in this volume, Magick in Theory and Practice (by Aleister Crowley, translated by Shima Hiroyuki, Uematsu Yasuo, and Eguchi Koretaka) and Liber 777 (by Aleister Crowley, translated by Eguchi Koretaka) were very useful. Thank you for the excellent reference material.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

I’ve taken a liking to the double high-class ladies. Combining is the romance of men. Learn to appreciate it.

-Kamachi Kazuma

?

Someone spoke within Academy City.

“Nhuh? What is it, Aneri? My smartphone’s just flashing ‘warning, warning’, but that doesn’t tell me anything.”

And somewhere else, someone else spoke.

“…What a pain in the ass. What dumb piece of shit decided that spying on me was a good idea?”

Bonus Short Story

“It’s finally begun: the 1st Never-Leaving-the-Kotatsu Championship.”

The spiky-haired idiot (←That’s enough to uniquely identify him) said that with a straight face.

Index naturally gave him a puzzled look from within the same kotatsu.

She lay on her stomach with only her head sticking out from the opposite side.

“Touma, we’ve already been in here for more than 3 hours, so isn’t it a little late for that?”

“Index-san, thanks to your perfect memory, you will have to carry this awful vision with you for the rest of your life. But I’ll forget all about it before long, so I can take it. Besides, it’s way too cold outside, the windows and doors are frozen shut, and the air conditioner is being overpowered! What is going on!? I don’t want to even think about doing housework right now!!”

That was what this was about.

The lock on the wall (which was half frosted over even inside) said it would be 11 AM soon. Even if school was canceled for this abnormal situation, he still had to prepare for lunch soon. And what about cleaning and laundry? There were all sorts of things a human had to deal with to survive.

And in this challenge(?), whoever left the kotatsu first would lose. It was doubtful that lazy nun could cook, clean, or do laundry, but it would be over nonetheless! If he showed her kindness even once – just once! – he was certain he would be forced to freeze his butt off doing all the work!!

But trouble soon arrived for him.

“Sphinx, go!”

“What’s the kitten supposed to do? Don’t think Kamijou-san is going to give in just because you meow that you want the door opened, that you’re hungry, or that you want to play!”

“But there is a 15cm former god over there.”

“O-O-Othinus!?”

Was this what a heroine should be doing? The cat would seem like a man-eating tiger to the blonde eyepatch girl (who was not a pirate) and he had to go save her, but he could not afford to leave the kotatsu!!

Kamijou’s eyes widened intensely as he grabbed an orange from atop the kotatsu and rolled it toward the others.

“I know that cats hate the smell of lemons and oranges!! Take this…!!”

“Tch. You win this round.”

“And I’m kind of okay with that new character of yours.”

Not leaving the kotatsu might seem simple since it was so comfortable inside…but there was a trap there too.

“Heh heh heh,” laughed Index. “It’s quite cold today. And the kotatsu still isn’t at full power.”

“Kh. The switch on the power cable is on your side? That means you can switch it on and off all you want. What was that switch called…!?”

“Heh heh heh heh heh heh. I also have the water pitcher and a cup, so I don’t have to worry about anything. Ahh, this cold water is so delicious. It doesn’t matter to me how hot it gets.”

“Oh, no. I should be at room temperature, but I only have 2 half-frozen oranges. I can’t fight a long-term battle like this!”

They could have worked together, but these two were fighting over the plank floating in the ocean.

“But if you’re going to play the sun, Kamijou-san will have to play the north wind.”

“Heh. You’re choosing the losing side.”

“Blanket flip!”

“Colllld!?”

Index screamed deeper than a heroine should.

“You fool! No matter how much you mess with that switch, I too have the right to

set the temperature!”

“Touma, that’s a self-destructive strategy!”

“Don’t be so sure! Flip, flip.”

“Gwaoh!!”

They fought back and forth, raising and lowering the temperature, for a while. At first glance, it looked like a never-ending battle, but a definite change arrived.

Index’s body shuddered with only her head poking out from the kotatsu.

And Kamijou spoke coldly as if it was none of his concern.

“Oh? What’s the matter, Index-san? It’s only a temperature difference.”

“T-Touma. Don’t tell me this was your cruel plan…”

“By the way, Index, this is just how our bodies work, so you don’t have to feel embarrassed. Yes, boys and girls have the same capacity. And your tank has to be full up after pouring all that water from the pitcher and drinking it from-…!?”

“…!!”

The spiky-haired idiot was hit by a powerful kick and came rolling out of the kotatsu.

Toaru Majutsu no Index: New Testament — Volume 18

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Last updated: 2017-10-22